

5-25-2003

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Recommended Citation

Jensen, Gordon A. (2003) "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: a Document of Healing?," *Consensus*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol29/iss1/6>

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The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: A Document of Healing?

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Introduction

The Lutheran World Federation gathered in Winnipeg in the summer of 2003, from July 21-31. The theme for this, its Tenth Assembly, was “For the Healing of the World.” The Study Book for the Assembly richly elaborates on the many areas of life which are in need of healing. At the Assembly “Village Groups” looked at some of these areas. It is significant, however, that the first Village Group mentioned in the Study Book is “God’s Healing Gift of Justification.” The introduction to this chapter declares:

With the signing of the Joint Declaration, renewed ecumenical attention is being given to the doctrine of justification. What is the relationship between justification, healing and “new creation”? In what ways is salvation as forgiveness of sin, liberation from bondage and spiritual healing especially needed today? How does this speak of people’s deepest spiritual yearnings? What difference do factors such as context and gender make? How can congregations proclaim and live this out more fully?!

These are crucial questions. They are forward-looking questions, meant to build upon the work done on the doctrine of justification by Lutherans and Roman Catholics since the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. It is hoped that the Village Group that meets during the Assembly will indeed wrestle with these serious questions. In this article, however, two different aspects of justification and healing will be explored: first, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) as an instrument to begin healing the rift

between the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church; and second, whether the JDDJ is a healing balm for the divided Lutheran communion.

A discussion of all the theological issues arising in the JDDJ is beyond the scope and possibility of this essay. The discussion over original sin, the place of justification in relationship to other doctrines of the church, the relationship of faith and works, the meaning of "simul iustus et peccator," the place of indulgences and purgatory, and the relationship of justification to sanctification and even ecclesiology are all themes that need to be discussed under the rubric of justification. Any sort of healing that might occur between Roman Catholic and Lutherans on the one hand, and among Lutherans on the other hand, needs to address these crucial items. In this article, however, only section 4:2 of the JDDJ will be addressed: It states:

4.2 Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous

22. We confess together that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin's enslaving power and imparts the gift of new life in Christ. When persons come by faith to share in Christ, God no longer imputes to them their sin and through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love. These two aspects of God's gracious action are not to be separated, for persons are by faith united with Christ, who in his person is our righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30): both the forgiveness of sin and the saving presence of God himself. Because Catholics and Lutherans confess this together, it is true to say that:

23. When Lutherans emphasize that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness, their intention is above all to insist that the sinner is granted righteousness before God in Christ through the declaration of forgiveness and that only in union with Christ is one's life renewed. When they stress that God's grace is forgiving love ("the favor of God"), they do not thereby deny the renewal of the Christian's life. They intend rather to express that

justification remains free from human cooperation and is not dependent on the life-renewing effects of grace in human beings.

24. When Catholics emphasize the renewal of the interior person through the reception of grace imparted as a gift to the believer, they wish to insist that God's forgiving grace always brings with it a gift of new life, which in the Holy Spirit becomes effective in active love. They do not thereby deny that God's gift of grace in justification remains independent of human cooperation [cf. Sources, section 4.2].²

Healing Divisions Between Roman Catholics and Lutherans

The JDDJ was not the first official attempt between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches to come to an agreement on justification as God's unilateral action of declaring and making people righteous. In the Augsburg Confession, the reformers tried to state in public the doctrine of justification in clear terms and to emphasize that their position was that of the church catholic. Melanchthon declared that for the reformers justification included two things: the forgiveness of sin, and God's actions of making one righteous: "Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that *we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God* out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us" (AC IV.1-2, German).³ The nuanced phrasing of the text hinted that justification included both declarative and transformative aspects. By stating it in this way, Melanchthon took into account the Roman Catholic concern for the process of justification while not denying the chief – and crucial – emphasis Luther and his party placed on imputed or reckoned righteousness.

While the possibility for rapprochement on justification opened up possibilities for healing the rift in the summer of 1530 the opportunity was not seized. From a Lutheran perspective, the bombastic early versions of the Roman Catholic Confutations indicated that a serious and open dialogue was not on the agenda at

that place or time. The considered response that was finally given in the accepted version of the Roman Confutations avoided discussing justification directly. Instead, it chose to focus on the issue of merits, declaring that “to reject human merit, which is acquired through the assistance of divine grace, is to agree with the Manichaeans and not the catholic church.” They later clarified this by adding, “All Catholics admit that our works of themselves have no merit but God’s grace makes them worthy to eternal life.”⁴ While the doors were open for a dialogue that might have clarified a common focus on justification as an action of God alone, other matters at Augsburg overshadowed any possibilities for consensus.

The potential for an agreement was not overlooked by some theologians of that time, however. A second attempt to reach consensus happened at the 1541 Colloquy at Regensburg, Germany. Roman Catholic theologians Cardinal Contarini and Johannes Gropper and the reformation theologians Martin Bucer and Philip Melancthon were among a group of theologians who tried to overcome the differences between them by working through the previously prepared *Regensburg Book* point by point. Tensions had increased by the end of 1540 with the shift from using the Augsburg Confession as the basis for discussion to the more recent Regensburg Book. Despite this political manoeuvring, a tentative agreement on justification was reached. However, they could not overcome the impasse over other issues such as transubstantiation or the power and primacy of the pope.

In reaching an agreement which contained echoes of the Augsburg Confession, they declared, “And thus we are justified or reckoned so through faith in Christ, which is made acceptable to God through his merits, not on account of our own worthiness or works. Yet on account of the righteousness within us, we are said to be righteous because we do good works, according to 1 John 3:7: ‘Whoever does right, is righteous’.”⁵ This recognition of forensic justification, here described as a “reckoned” righteousness, apparently satisfied Melancthon. The theme of justification as transformation or renewal was also discussed, since this was a concern of the Romanists. Melancthon could say that this concern was reflected in the German version of the Augsburg Confession when it declared that we “receive forgiveness of sin *and become righteous*” (AC IV.1 Italics mine).

The apparent agreement on justification at Regensburg was short-lived, however. The leaders of both the Roman Catholic and Reformation parties criticised the agreement, and it was quickly rejected.⁶ Luther did not object to the notion of being made righteous, but he was clearly uncomfortable with the subsequent language that potentially opened the door for human participation in justification, such as the Regensburg declaration that “the sinner is justified by a living and efficacious faith,” which is a “movement of the Holy Spirit by which those who truly repent of their old life are directed to God and truly grasp the mercy that is promised ... [and] accept the grace and benefits of God”

Luther also balked at the suggestion that “This faith that justifies is the same faith that is active through love,”⁷ declaring in a letter to the Elector that “But if [Eck] boasts (as he most certainly will) and stands on the statement in Galatians 5: ‘Faith is active,’ saying that they have always taught this, then the agreement is like Christ said in Matthew 9: ‘No one sews a new piece of cloth on an old cloak because the tear will be made worse’.”⁸ Luther felt that the phrase, “faith active in love,” opened the back door to a human contribution to righteousness. If the Romanists were suggesting that one must do acts of love in order for faith to be “living” and “efficacious,” then Luther would reject it. If, however, the phrase meant that one who is justified by God alone is thus transformed by God’s grace, and as a consequence will bear the fruit of love for neighbour, then it was not a problem. For Luther, one’s actions toward the neighbour are a part of the realm of civil or human righteousness, but it has no place in one’s justification in the presence of God (*coram Deo*). Luther declared, “The saying in Galatians 5 does not speak about justification but about the life of the justified.”⁹

Both the Augsburg Confession and the Regensburg Colloquy picked up on two fundamental aspects of justification: the Lutheran emphasis on reckoned righteousness and the Romanist focus on the transformative impact of justification upon daily life. The Lutherans wanted to emphasize the declaration or proclamation of this reckoned righteousness, and the Roman Catholics wanted to describe how this declaration transforms a person. The problems arose when the Roman Catholics felt that the Lutheran understanding of justification did not bring about an ontological change, while the Lutherans felt that the

Roman Catholic position still left control of justification in the hands of those who earned their salvation with acts of love.

After the failure to reach consensus at Regensburg, the rift widened. The split appeared to become irreparable after the decrees on justification at the Council of Trent (1547) and the posture taken in the Formula of Concord (1577). Both Roman Catholics and Lutherans pronounced anathemas upon what they described as “false teachings” about justification. The sides were so far apart that any reconciliation or healing seemed impossible. It was only after 400 years, with the beginning of post Vatican II dialogues, that the Lutherans and Roman Catholics would once again carry on dialogues about the doctrine of justification.

In these post-Vatican II dialogues which led up to the formulation of the JDDJ, one of the historical dilemmas with which the Roman Catholics and Lutherans were faced was the question of what to do with the “anathemas” that were apparently levelled against one another. To ignore these anathemas in the proceedings of the Council of Trent and the Formula of Concord would be to deny their histories. The issue was succinctly stated in the title of the European Roman Catholic-Lutheran dialogues: “The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?”¹⁰ This question requires two responses.

The first response to this question of whether the condemnations still divide requires one to step back and ask another question: do the condemnations actually apply? On the one hand, it is clear that some of the anathemas decreed at the Council of Trent were obviously directed at the Lutherans and were thus reflecting the Roman Curia’s official Tridentine doctrine. On the other hand, an argument could be made that the Lutheran condemnations, as found in the Formula of Concord, are not primarily directed at the Roman Catholics. The Formula of Concord deals primarily with inter-Lutheran disagreements, not Lutheran – Roman Catholic controversies. Moreover, the member churches of the LWF do not generally formally subscribe to the Formula of Concord. The generally accepted documents of the LWF member churches are the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism, with some adding the Large Catechism and the Schmalkald Articles. As such, there are no formal, subscribed-to condemnations by the family of LWF Lutherans with regard to the Roman Catholic position on justification!¹¹

The second response to the question of whether the condemnations still divide is dependant upon the scope and nature of the condemnations of the Formula of Concord. Even if one is to include the whole corpus of the Book of Concord as the Lutheran position of the LWF member churches one must ask how the anathemas are to be treated. Contrary to many reports about the JDDJ, the Roman Catholics and Lutherans did not simply decide to “cancel out” their condemnations of each other. What the JDDJ did declare was that the condemnations do not apply to the churches’ understandings of justification at this time. The distinction is important. The authors of the JDDJ realized that a simple cancellation of the anathemas was neither appropriate nor legitimate. There are at least three reasons for this.

First, it would be highly inappropriate to tinker with historically authoritative documents. It would do violence to the historical texts themselves to go through the proceedings of Trent and the Formula of Concord and remove the anathemas.

Second, the anathemas were not removed precisely because they have served, and continue to serve, as reminders to both parties that when vital aspects of justification omitted, misunderstood, or over-emphasized, then this false teaching should still fall under the “anathema” heading. False teachings about justification still need to be addressed.

Third, it is important to note that the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches are not specifically named in anathemas levelled against each other over the issue of justification, even if it seems apparent that the other church is indeed the object of their condemnations. Thus, for example, in the Formula of Concord the Lutherans have no trouble condemning the teachings of the Pelagians (FC-Ep II.9), the Enthusiasts (FC-Ep II.13), and the Anabaptists (FC-Ep XII.2-19). There is a decided reserve, however, exhibited in the Formula of Concord when it comes to condemning, by name, either the “wayward” Lutherans or Roman Catholics. Rather, it is specific teachings that are condemned. There is a clear attempt to avoid personal attacks. For example, it is clear that Andrew Osiander is the person they have in mind when they declare, “Therefore we reject and condemn all the following errors: 1. That Christ is our righteousness only according to the human nature, etc.” (FC-Ep. IV.12-13). One might say that Roman Catholics and Lutherans, for

the most part, were more concerned with condemning what they perceived as bad theology or theology open to misunderstandings, than with condemning the individual who taught that theology.

Moreover, the most common formula used in the Formula of Concord states simply, “condemned are those ...”,¹² while in the proceedings of the Council of Trent the formula is simply: “if anyone says ...”.¹³ The wording of these formulae suggest that what is condemned are *potential* “heresies,” not heresies actually practised by Lutherans or others. While such terminology definitely suggests that the two parties had specific teachers of these positions in mind when the condemnations were levelled, the tendency is to condemn abuses and the obvious stereotypical misunderstandings of the positions of others or the meanings of specific words used by others. There is no indication that those things are actually being taught by any side, except when they are specifically named.

One other factor to consider is that in the Formula of Concord a majority of the condemnations concerning justification are directed toward the various factions amongst the Lutherans which necessitated the writing of the Formula of Concord in the first place. The Roman Catholic positions taken at Trent were not the primary focus of attention. The primary focus in the article on justification in Formula of Concord was to correct the teachings of Major and Osiander not the teachings of the Council of Trent.

One would be remiss to not look at some of the theological issues and approaches taken in the JDDJ itself. Perhaps the best way to look at what has been described about the justification in Section 4.2 of the JDDJ can be reflected in a simplified chart. It summarizes much of what has been said to this point, and is followed by a brief commentary:

The Doctrine of Justification

Anathema	Correct Teaching	Anathema	
Cheap grace (Bonhoeffer) human actions are overlooked	Justification as a declaration (forensic justification) which makes a person righteous by Gods grace alone	Justification as an act of Gods grace which transforms a person	Works righteousness Gods actions are overlooked
Universalism ones actions toward the neighbour are rendered irrelevant	An external declaration changes our status before God (coram Deo)	One is made righteous through an internal metanoia or change	The cross of Christ is rendered irrelevant when all depends on human works
Suggests that Gods declaration doesnt change ones ontological status before God (coram Deo)	Gods declaration creates the reality of righteousness in a person: God speaks and so it is.(Genesis 1)	Gods declaration leads a person to bear fruit. The Word of God does not return void. (Isaiah 55)	Suggests that ones actions ultimately determine ones status before God (coram Deo)
Tendency to focus on the Word of Gods promises without taking up the cross.	Asks, What has happened? What is this new reality? Focuses on the source of justification	Asks, How does it happen? What does it do to us? Focuses on the effect of justification	Tendency to focus on the cross of ones own suffering apart from the Word of Gods promises
	Labelled by Lutheran orthodoxy as reckoned righteousness (FC-SD 3:32), or justification	Labelled by Lutheran orthodoxy as inchoate righteousness (FC-SD 3:32), or sanctification	

What section 4.2 of the JDDJ says, if one reads between the lines, is that each agrees to hold the other accountable for teaching, in Lutheran terms, both justification and sanctification, with the

understanding that while they are clearly different, they are also intimately interconnected. At the same time, the document would suggest that whenever one emphasizes one part of the correct teaching in an extreme way, it can lead to positions that are problematic.

For example, if justification is only seen as forensic, then there is the possibility that this forensic view would insist that the declaration does not “change” the person who is justified—that no ontological change in that person takes place. If that were the case, the very nature of the Word of God as a transformative and creating power would be overlooked. As with creation, when God speaks a Word, it does something! A new creation happens; a new reality comes into being. Likewise, when all the attention is placed on the renewing grace of God it is sometimes easy to slip into a mind set that suggests that one’s successes at self improvement are deserving of God’s attention and earns one the status of “justified before God.” What the JDDJ hints at is that whenever the “boundary” of acceptable teaching on justification is crossed, the anathemas still apply. For both, there is a concern to recognise God’s actions in forensic justification. Thus, the JDDJ makes the seven strong joint statements which uphold and highlight the work of Christ in justification apart from human works for salvation.

Does the JDDJ bring healing to the brokenness between Roman Catholics and Lutherans? The most that can be said at this point in time is that there is the potential for healing to occur. A careful handling and revisiting of our respective histories and historical documents may make it possible to bring some healing between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. Hopefully we are past that stage when we are seeking out the “red flags” of the theology of the other without paying careful attention to the context in which they are said. Perhaps we can move beyond stereotypes of each other to engaged theological conversation on the theological issues themselves. Moreover, the willingness to seek understanding on what each side actually means when they use a certain word, rather than one’s own self-assumed definitions of that word, has gone a long way to bridge the perceived gap in our theologies.

The JDDJ has begun the process of healing between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. But it is far from a perfect document. Much work still needs to be done before healing can occur in any significant

way. Healing may be possible if Roman Catholics and Lutherans can learn to recognize the different approaches and accept the two churches' use in their theological enterprise. While Luther and Lutherans in general have focussed on the theological task of describing the realities of God's actions, the theological focus for Roman Catholics has been on the process by which God's actions transform life. In terms of justification, then, Lutherans have asked "*What is this?*" (to borrow a phrase from Luther's *Small Catechism*) and have responded to this question with a description of what they see – a "snapshot" of the present reality. Roman Catholics, on the other hand, are more apt to ask "*How does this happen?*" responding with a description of the process by which reality occurs.¹⁴ Thus, Lutherans have often been content to describe the gracious proclamation of righteousness by God alone, whereas Roman Catholics have examined and explored how this grace takes root in a person and transforms them. Chemnitz himself recognized this difference in understanding the word "justification" but did not feel that the matter itself was contentious:

For the papalists understand the word "justify" according to the manner of the Latin composition as meaning "to make righteous" through a donated or infused quality of inherent righteousness, from which works of righteousness proceed. The Lutherans, however, accept the word "justify" in the Hebrew manner of speaking; therefore they define justification as the absolution of sins, or the remission of sins, through imputation of life, and that only for the sake of Christ, who is apprehended by faith. And yet they teach at the same time that renewal follows, that love and good works must be begun. *Therefore, there will be no contention about the matter itself, but only about the word "justification," which arises from this, that each understands and interprets that word differently.*¹⁵

Later, in response to the Jesuits, Chemnitz states, "This is not the point in dispute, whether the renewal belongs to the benefits of Christ, whether a person, when he is reconciled to God, is at the same

time also renewed through the Holy Spirit, whether the new obedience ought to follow. For these things we teach plainly and clearly. But this is the question, how and why we can be justified, so that we may be received by God into grace and accepted into eternal life.”¹⁶ Chemnitz makes it clear that the distinction between himself and the Jesuits is not over the process of renewal that occurs as a result of justification. His concern is to reserve the use of the word justification for its judicial or forensic usage.¹⁷

Problems arise when one does not realize that different methodological approaches are used. As a result, people talk past each other and misunderstandings and frustrations arise simply because the one party is asking, and answering, different questions than the other party. The possibility for healing arises when people in a conversation begin to recognize these basic differences. The noted Roman Catholic scholar, Avery Dulles, noted this in an interview in the *Western Catholic Reporter*. Referring to the papal encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unam Sint*, Dulles argued that

theological dialogue must take account of the ways of thinking and historical experiences of the other party The Catholic thought form as expressed at Trent was scholastic and heavily influenced by Greek metaphysics, whereas the Lutheran thought form was more existential and personal.

Thus, Dulles concludes, “the decrees of Trent remain valid in Catholic teaching, but should not be used as the standard for measuring Lutheran doctrines as expressed in relation to a different historical perspective.”¹⁸

Healing the rift that thus developed between Roman Catholics and Lutherans requires that the two churches actually listen to one another and try to hear the perspective of the other rather than insisting that the other theologians speak the language and jargon that is most comfortable for themselves. Healing requires a pastoral approach in the dialogues.

In the JDDJ, there is evidence that careful listening has occurred, and in large measure this allows the document to have the potential to be a healing document between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. The pattern that this document follows is therefore very instructive.

Biblical agreement on justification forms the foundational section of the document. Then, in Section 4 of the JDDJ seven particular aspects of justification are addressed. The pattern that the document follows is to state the common agreement reached for each of these seven areas, followed by individual paragraphs describing what Roman Catholics and Lutherans mean or understand by that particular statement. It is in this section that the differences in approaches and language are clearly revealed. Lutherans focus on descriptive theology and language, while Roman Catholics approach the topics from a process perspective and language. The awareness of these differences paves the way for healing.

Once again we ask, does the JDDJ bring about healing between the Roman Catholics and Lutherans? The answer is both yes and no. On one level a “convergence,” as the JDDJ calls it, has obviously been reached. Common statements have been made and agreed to. At another level the beginnings of reconciliation between family members who have for years been separated because of confessional loyalties gives strong witness to the healing power of any signs of public convergence between the traditions of their forebears. For example, at one joint worship service held to mark the signing of the JDDJ in Augsburg on October 31, 1999, family members expressed through stories (often accompanied with tears) the newfound hope for their family that has come through the signing of this accord. The power of this public recognition that has been brought about by the signing of the JDDJ is something that should not be drowned out by all the academic and theological rhetoric that has been generated by this document.

Whether convergence is to be equated to healing is a different matter, however. It would seem more accurate to say that the document has not brought healing so much as it has begun to take steps to diagnose the problems. This preliminary step of diagnosis is crucial but it is not the same thing as giving a prescription that will bring about healing. On the basis of the initial diagnosis Lutherans and Roman Catholics can explore even more carefully the different traditional understandings of justification and the role of faith and grace in justification. Out of this process the way for a healing of the theological, historical and emotional rifts may be addressed.

The signing of the JDDJ has at least begun a process of healing between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. While many scholars have

expressed the need for even more precise language than what was found in the document, the JDDJ has at least put the topic of justification back in the limelight of theological discourse. The Roman Catholics and Lutherans stand to reap from the renewed discussions on justification as well as indulgences, original sin, the state and status of the justified sinner, and the role and relationship of good works in the life of a Christian. There is at least the potential for healing to take place.

Healing Divisions Among Lutherans

The situation is different among Lutherans, for at the present time it appears that the prognosis for healing is not even a possibility. It is not a new fracture within the Lutheran family, however. The extended discussion on justification that is found in the Formula of Concord reveals that there was already a strong difference of opinion over “reckoned” and “transformative” justification shortly after Luther’s death in 1546 – the same issues that arose at Regensburg in 1541. In the Formula of Concord, Lutherans decided to make a distinction between “reckoned righteousness” and “inchoate righteousness” (FC-SD 3:32). The former was called justification (or forensic justification), and the latter was labelled sanctification (FC-SD 3:40). The two were not to be confused or co-mingled in any way. As the framers of the Solid Declaration stated, “But these two kinds of righteousness dare not be mixed with each other or simultaneously introduced into the article on justification by faith before God. For because this righteousness that is begun in us – this renewal – is imperfect and impure in this life because of our flesh, a person cannot use it in any way to stand before God’s judgement throne. Instead, only the righteousness of the obedience, suffering and death of Christ, which is reckoned in faith, can stand before God’s tribunal.” (FC-SD 3:32).

This was quite different from the declaration in the Augsburg Confession, which declared that “we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us” (AC IV.1-2). The Formula of Concord, reflecting the move toward a Lutheran orthodoxy, was not content with the broader definition of justification in the Augsburg Confession.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LC-MS) has strongly criticized the JDDJ, primarily over the JDDJ's willingness to work from the definition of justification found in the Augsburg Confession rather than that found in the Formula of Concord. In their response to the JDDJ, the LC-MS seminary at Fort Wayne, Indiana noted:

The foremost defect of the document is that it does not come clean on the most glaring conflict between Augsburg and Trent. For Lutherans, justification is essentially forensic, that is, God declares the sinner righteous on account of and in Christ. Roman Catholics define justification as an internal transformation of the believer, a "process" which Lutherans place in the area of sanctification, about which too there are different understandings ... The title of paragraph 4.2, "Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous," to be sure, could be understood in a Lutheran way ... However, the Formula of Concord expressly rejects the view that justifying righteousness "consists of two pieces or parts, namely the gracious forgiveness of sins and, as a second element, renewal or sanctification."¹⁹

It is interesting that the response of the theologians from the Fort Wayne seminary rely upon the Formula of Concord for this distinction between forensic and transformative justification. Herein lies one of the crucial differences between the LC-MS and the LWF member churches such as the ELCIC. On the one hand, in the constitutions of the LC-MS, all the symbols of the Book of Concord are given equal authority. Thus, for the LC-MS theologians, to give a response to Part 4.2 of the JDDJ other than what they did would be unconstitutional. On the other hand, the constitutions of the ELCIC and the other LWF member churches generally give foremost authority to the Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism and treat the other symbols in the Book of Concord as "further witnesses to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession."²⁰ Thus, their acceptance of the JDDJ is based on greater emphasis placed on the Augsburg Confession's declaration that "we receive the forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God . . ." – in other words, that justification

includes two parts – than on the Formula of Concord which clearly separates the two parts into justification and sanctification. The differences reveal that both groups of churches are simply being faithful to their constitutions! The rift between the two Lutheran church bodies is deeper than disagreements over justification; there are divisive differences over the authority given to the symbols of the Book of Concord, and these differences are embedded in their constitutions.

There were also critiques of the JDDJ from theologians within the LWF family members. Prominent were the six Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) theologians from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, who declared:

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 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 promise²¹

While the LC-MS theologians were appreciative of the critique from these six theologians, they did wonder where the dissenting voices had been earlier, especially since the U.S. Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue had clearly stated in its 1983 report, *Justification by Faith*, “... By justification we are both declared and made righteous. Justification, therefore, is not a legal fiction. God, in justifying, effects what he promises; he forgives sins and makes us truly righteous.”²² Here the echo from Augsburg Confession IV is clear, and is once again at the centre of the controversy.

A third critique of the JDDJ, also from members of the LWF family, came from a large group of Protestant theologians in Germany in a document published in a German newspaper shortly before the signing of the JDDJ. These imposing scholars raised questions about the signing of the “Official Common Statement”

(OCS) rather than the JDDJ itself, but also expressed concerns about the JDDJ. Two hundred and fifty-one theologians signed the protest. Among other things, they felt that there needed to be further clarification on the doctrine of justification since there was a real lack of consensus on “the meaning of word and faith for justification.”²³ The critique of Chemnitz, noted earlier, is still in play. Significantly, in relationship to the theme of healing, the protesters declared, “The signing of the OCS would result in no improvements whatsoever in the practicalities of Protestants and Catholics living together in families and congregations. At this point it becomes clear that the meaning of the Doctrine of Justification as the centre of the teaching and life of the church has been ineffectual in these texts.”²⁴

There was a quick reaction to these statements, however. At a Luther Colloquium at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary (an ELCA Seminary) on October 27, 1999, Gunther Gassman suggested that “[the German theologians] are caught in ‘formula fundamentalism’ with their ‘abstract critiques concerned only with right language and phrases’.”²⁵

The division among the Lutherans themselves on the understanding of justification, supported by various interpretations of the confessional documents and based on different authoritative status for the various symbols of the Lutheran Confessions, may, in the long term, be harder to heal than the rift between Roman Catholics and Lutherans. Peter Brunner already recognized this rift in 1960 when he wrote, “Despite the express affirmation of the doctrinal basis, it is doubted that a *consensus* with respect to the doctrine of the gospel actually exists among the churches joined together in the World Federation.”²⁶

The LWF family got a glimpse of this brokenness when they failed to come to an agreement on justification at the 1963 LWF Assembly in Helsinki, Finland. As Braaten noted, “At Helsinki, Lutherans issued a proclamation which stated: ‘The man of today no longer asks, “How can I find a gracious God?” His question is more radical, more elementary: he asks about God as such, “Where is God?” He suffers not from God’s wrath, but from the impression of his absence; not from sin, but from the meaninglessness of his own existence; he asks not about a gracious God, but whether God really exists’.”²⁷ In the commemorative history of the LWF, it was acknowledged that, “The inability of the Commission on Theology at

the Helsinki Assembly of the LWF in 1963 to present a generally acceptable report on the doctrine of justification gave rise to an antitheological spirit”²⁸

In Canada, the widening gap between the ELCIC and the LC-MS affiliated Lutheran Church-Canada (LC-C) is a painful reminder that there is not, at present, much hope for reconciliation or healing. It would take much more than an agreement on justification that was acceptable to all. As history reminds us, even agreement on Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is not enough. Healing takes more than an agreement that it is “enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word” (AC VII.2). Understanding exactly what the gospel is remains the stumbling block. Thus, the rejection of a “prescription” for healing, if that is what the JDDJ was meant to be, is a strong reminder that healing can be refused even if it were possible. Even if the JDDJ is seen as an analysis of what ails the body, rather than a healing balm, if there is no agreement on the analysis, the potential for healing is drastically reduced. There is much to be done before healing can become a reality. The prayer ascends, “Bring healing, O Lord.” Hopefully, we can at least agree with this prayer.

We are thus caught in a tension: as Lutherans we have these great gifts to offer the world in the form of our theology, and yet we cannot seem to figure out how to describe that which is so close our heart and identity as Lutherans. Perhaps Lutherans need to pray for their own healing as they pray for the healing of the world.

Notes

- ¹ Study Book: For the Healing of the World (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2002), 127.
- ² The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, English translation ©2000 by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., The Lutheran World Federation, and The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 18-19.
- ³ Emphasis mine. All quotations from the Book of Concord are from: Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

- ⁴ “The Confutation of the Augsburg Confession,” translated by Mark D. Tranvik, Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord, Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen, eds., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 108-9.
- ⁵ “The Regensburg Book of 1541,” Corpus Refomatorum Philippi Melanthonis Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia (Halle and Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1834-1860), 4:119-201, as found in Eric Lund, ed., Documents From the History of Lutheranism, 1517-1750 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 72-3.
- ⁶ Robert D. Linder, “The Catholic Reformation,” Introduction to the History of Christianity: First Century to the Present Day – A Worldwide Story, edited by Tim Dowley (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 412.
- ⁷ “The Regensburg Book of 1541,” Documents, 72. Note here that Luther rightly notices a shift from an understanding of justification as an action of God which unilaterally makes a person righteous, where God transforms a person, to the possibility that humans participate in and even facilitate their own process of transformation. Thus, it is no longer an work of God, no longer something that happens sola fide and sola gratia.
- ⁸ Letter from Luther and Bugenhagen to Elector Johann Friedrich (May 10 or 11, 1541). Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Briefwechsel, 18 volumes,(Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930-85), 9:406-9. Hereafter referred to as WABr. English translation found in Documents, 74-5.
- ⁹ Letter from Luther, WABr 9:406-9. English translation found in Documents, 75.
- ¹⁰ Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., “The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?” translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).
- ¹¹ This fact is recognized in footnote 3 of the Preamble to the JDDJ, paragraph 1: “It should be noted that some Lutheran churches include only the Augsburg Confession and Luther’s Small Catechism among their binding confessions. These texts contain no condemnations about justification in relation to the Roman Catholic Church.” JDDJ, 9.
- ¹² While the Roman Catholics are only occasionally named in the articles on justification in the Epitome and the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, and here only in terms of specific interpretations of the Council of Trent, this is not the case in other articles, where “papists” are specifically named. Thus, FC-SD III.45-52 refer to specific canons of the Council of Trent, but reflected is a certain nuanced reading of the canons that may overlook the concern for the “process of justification”

and different uses of certain words by the Roman Catholics. In other places, such as the article on free will, the reformers are quite willing to mention by name the “papists and scholastics” (FC-SD II.76) or “papists and monks” (FC-SD II.79), or again in FC-SD VII.108 when “papistic transubstantiation” is named as a heresy.

- ¹³ For example: Canon 1, on Justification, says: “If anyone says that man can be justified before God by his own good works, whether done by his own natural powers or through the teaching of the law, without divine grace through Jesus Christ, let him be anathema.” Or Canon 10: “If anyone says that men are justified without the justice of Christ, whereby he merited for us, or by that justice are formally just, let him be anathema.” H. J. Schroeder, Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1941), 42-3.
- ¹⁴ The JDDJ recognizes this in paragraph 40, where it notes that there are “differences in language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification.” JDDJ, 26.
- ¹⁵ Emphasis mine. Martin Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, Part 1, translated by Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 467.
- ¹⁶ Chemnitz, Examinations, Part 1, 473.
- ¹⁷ Chemnitz, Examinations, Part 1, 476.
- ¹⁸ Western Catholic Reporter, November 8, 1999.
- ¹⁹ Department of Systematic Theology, Concordia Lutheran Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “A Response to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” in The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective: An Evaluation of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” by the Departments of Systematic Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary Fort Wayne and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Prepared in response to a request from President Alvin Barry, LC-MS (St. Louis: The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1999), 17-18.
- ²⁰ For example, Article II, Section 4 of the ELCIC constitution reads: “This church subscribes to the documents of the Book of Concord of 1580 as witnesses to the way in which the Holy Scriptures have been correctly understood, explained and confessed for the sake of the Gospel, namely
- a. The Apostles’, the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds as the chief confessions of the Christian faith;
 - b. The unaltered Augsburg Confession as its basic formulation of Christian doctrine;

- c. Luther's Small Catechism as a clear summary of Christian doctrine;
- d. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Luther's Large Catechism, the Smalcald Articles with the Treatise, and the Formula of Concord as further witnesses to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession."

- ²¹ "A Response to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," 18.
- ²² H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy and Joseph A. Burgess, Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), Sections 156 (5) and 158, pages 71-2.
- ²³ Matthias Drobinski, "Lutherische Theologen warnen vor Unterschrift," Süddeutsche Zeitung, October 21, 1999. Translation by Mark Menacher. From www.wordalone.org/resources/original_german_text.doc accessed July 1, 2003.
- ²⁴ *bid.*
- ²⁵ Report by Mark Chavez on the Luther Colloquium, October 27, 1999, accessed at www.wordalone.org/resources/jddj_opponents_criticized.htm on July 2, 2003.
- ²⁶ Emphasis added. Peter Brunner, "The LWF as an Ecclesiological Problem," Lutheran World 7 No. 3 (December, 1960), 237-56.
- ²⁷ Quoted by Carl E. Braaten, "Principles of Lutheran Theology" (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 38-9.
- ²⁸ Jens Holger Schjørring, Prasanna Kumari and Norman A. Hjelm, editors, Viggor Mortensen, Coordinator, From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 189. A brief description of this Assembly and the questions raised in the debate over justification is given on pages 375-81.

