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International

LUTHER'S GOSPEL



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Ministry

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Phone: 301-680-6510; fax: 301-680-6502;

Email: norcottj@gc.adventist.org or

drapers@gc.adventist.org (editorial offices);

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May 2000 issue

I have been receiving *Ministry* for most of my twenty-four years in pastoral ministry; this is, however, the first "Letter to the Editor." Two articles in the May 2000 issue have prompted such an unusual response.

The first article is on the "Excitement of Expository Preaching," by J. Grant Swank, Jr. That was the primary method of preaching my pastor-father used for 45 years. I have tried to follow in his footsteps. My goal is for my people to walk out of church knowing what a passage of Scripture teaches. Expository preaching enables me to accomplish that goal. As Swank says, it also "grows its own fruit of spiritual growth within the preacher."

The cover article on "Biblical Creation" also aroused my interest. I appreciate Dr. Gibson's articulation of the issues and agree with many of his conclusions. However, there seems to be a number of flaws in his argument. First, he fails to distinguish consistently between "scientific evidence" and "contemporary scientific theory." By "scientific evidence" I take him to mean the facts and data of the world around us. Those facts and data are the same for the biblical creationist, the evolutionist, and the theistic evolutionist. None of the three studies a different world than the other two. The conflict lies, as Dr. Gibson notes in his closing paragraph, in their presuppositions, the interpretations of the facts based on those presuppositions, and the theories formed from those interpretations. For those who believe in the biblical account of the six 24-hour day Creation, there is no tension, as Dr. Gibson states, between reconciling "nature" and the

Bible; there is only tension between "scientific theory" and the Bible. Secondly, by the construct Dr. Gibson uses for his article (i.e., statement of view, Biblical evidence, scientific evidence/theory), he seems to indicate that the Bible and scientific theory are on equal footing, for us to examine, evaluate, and decide which is true. However, such is not the case. The Bible holds exclusive claim to truth, including truth regarding the origin of the universe. Since the Bible states God created the heavens and earth in six 24-hour days, all data will ultimately agree therewith. Any failure on our part to be able to reconcile the data with that teaching of the Bible grows out of the ignorance of our finitude compared with the infinite God who has revealed His action of creation in His Word.—Ronald Ruark, pastor, Central City Baptist Church, Central City, Nebraska.

June-July issue

It was a real joy to read the June-July issue on the blessed hope. Every article was good. Richard Davidson's "The Second Advent and the Fullness of Time" was a masterpiece. After 35 years of preaching these wonderful truths, it still thrills my soul to read articles of this caliber.

I was especially impressed with the portrayal of the long-suffering of God before He allows judgment to come upon sinners as at the Flood, Babel, Sodom, and Jerusalem. Davidson made the grace of God paramount in the usually dry subject of the 2,300-day prophecy. I'll preach it again for the sixtieth time with new enthusiasm.—Les Fowler, pastor, Booneville/Ozark, Arkansas.

● I read the June-July 2000 issue of *Ministry* carefully. Competent writers wrote excellent articles dealing with the great truth of the second coming of Christ. Only one writer, in the midst of one sentence, made this short remark, "Latter Rain of the Holy Spirit drenches us," (p. 39). All the articles avoided commenting on Revelation 18:1-4, which to my understanding precedes the Second Coming.

I noticed also that the General Convention at Toronto had the beautiful cheering slogan "Almost Home." For the pilgrim this sounds very encouraging. But do we realize that after 2,000 years of Christianity, only 30 percent of the world's population profess to be Christians of any denomination? The other 70 percent is made up of Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, atheists, etc. These do not accept Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation and eternal life.

Have we as a church organization, in over 150 years of our existence, preached "present truth" to all these people?—Jeremia Florea, retired minister, Arkansas.

We want to hear from you!

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If you're receiving *Ministry* bimonthly and haven't paid for a subscription, it's not a mistake. Since 1928 *Ministry* has been published for Seventh-day Adventist ministers. We believe, however, that the time has come for clergy everywhere to experience a resurgence of faith in the authority of Scripture and in the great truths that reveal the gospel of our salvation by grace, through faith alone in Jesus Christ. We want to share our aspirations and faith in a way that will provide inspiration and help to you as clergy. We hope you will accept this journal as our outstretched hand to you. Look over our shoulder, take what you want and find helpful, and discard what you can't use. Bimonthly gift subscriptions are available to all licensed and/or ordained clergy. Requests should be on church letterhead and addressed to the editorial office.



A friend of mine who does not think that Paul wrote the book of Hebrews once said that if officially asked to recant his

belief, he would do so . . . immediately. "And if you asked me," says my friend, "why I'd recanted, I'd tell you, 'because it's not worth dying for!'" I think my friend is a wise man.

There are too many dubious things that we squabble about in our churches. We sometimes seem more willing to kill for them than to die for them. Most of these "truths" are not worthy of the sweat, struggle, and subdivision with which we load them. They become exhausting, damaging distractions that stir up clouds of dust and emit toxic emotional gasses that get in our spiritual eyes and lungs so we can't see or breathe deeply the pure air of what really does matter.

On the other hand, there are verities that lie in the fallow soil of our souls, unrecognized for their value. We may give them a certain lip service, but the attention they receive is not proportionate to their almost unbelievable value.

Human beings have always tended to be that way with the gospel. We tend to be that way with the primacy of the magnificent truth of justification (and please allow the use of such words in their classical form in this issue of *Ministry*!), along with the realities that cluster close to it, such as "sanctification." The gospel and justification always seem to come in a certain disguise, or appear dressed in camouflage; though their obscurity has much more to do with poor spiritual eyesight and the stuff we so expertly arrange around them than with some mischievous trait they possess in themselves.

The coming of "justification" to the human soul is like the appearing

It's worth dying for

W I L L E V A

of Jesus Himself in the least of all towns, Bethlehem. He was conceived in questionable circumstances, born among animals (in the hotel garage, if you like) from the womb of a completely unsung peasant girl, wrapped in cloths (probably borrowed), and laid in a donkey's feed box. The Bible says that this happened because there was no room for Jesus in the inn itself. But the underlying reason for the lack of room was that nobody had an inkling of Who He was and so they did not value Him. If they had, they'd have made room for Him; even as we make ample room for justification the moment we realize its premier value in comparison with all the other things we have come to believe are so important and in many cases have put in its place.

And so it is true that at some point we may suddenly recognize some overlooked reality for what it actually is, grasp it up, and become willing to lay down our lives to possess such a treasure. The stone which the builders rejected becomes our chief cornerstone. This is what it was like at the time of the Protestant Reformation.

But what was it that caused the souls of those who became known as "Reformers" to burn like they did over things like "justification by faith"? This is a vitally important question as we take up the critical matters of this issue of *Ministry*. Such a question is foundational because it was not merely some carefully calibrated doctrinal equation that was formulated by Martin Luther and

others. Though, by all means biblical, justification as the Reformers saw it, was definitely an experiential, life-altering paradigm shift that ushered into the human heart the peace and perspective every person profoundly longs for in his or her deepest being. The Reformers saw that the gospel (justification particularly) was the power of God unto salvation and that simple, uncluttered faith gave them the effective way of tapping into that power. It was the transcendent *experience* of justification, its regenerating, refreshing, life-altering effect on the human soul, conscience and consciousness, that made all the difference.

Thus, the significant divergence that came up between the Reformers and the mother church were not simply because they or their Catholic counterparts were obtuse and unbending. Rather, the Reformers could not go the way of the Council of Trent because Trent's positions effectively misdirected the basic principles upon which such a blessed sense of personal justification, innocence and peace before God had come to them. In the mercy of God, they had serendipitously come upon the pearl of great price, the treasure hid in the field. They knew their discovery was true to Scripture and to experience and, captured by its wonder, they *could* not compromise it in the ways that were being suggested without destroying it or having to let go of the treasure altogether.

When it comes to any dialogue over such things, such as the one we evaluate in this issue of *Ministry*: The *Joint Declaration on the Dogma of Justification*, we simply must fully factor in this subjective, experiential, or existential element or we will not understand what was and still is the essential reality that people are willing to die for and that must be dealt with before genuine understanding can emerge. ■

LUTHER AND THE GOSPEL

On October 31, 1517 Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg Castle Chapel to challenge some of the teachings of the Catholic Church. With that, the Protestant Reformation was born.



Hans K. LaRondelle, Th.D., is professor emeritus of theology, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

That is, it became visible. The truth is, however, that its birth pangs had already been born, in relative silence and for some time in the soul of Martin Luther himself.

The journey to the castle was marked by a series of spiritual struggles within the man. He wanted to please God whatever the cost and worked to be found worthy on the day of judgment. By acts of penitence, he tried to achieve reconciliation with God. Yet, he did not find peace of soul. Even his scholastic Bible study gave him no rest.

In 1507 Luther was consecrated into the Roman Catholic priesthood. Nine years later, he became a doctor of theology and professor at Wittenberg and took the solemn vow: "I swear to defend the gospel truth with all my might." He kept this vow till the end of his life.

It was from the Bible that Luther sought and received light and insight, although the light came only gradually over the years in a series of discoveries. Called to teach theology, Luther began an exegetical study of some books in the Old Testament and then of the New Testament. His major concern was to find God's will and feed His flock in Wittenberg.

It soon became clear to him that salvation could not be earned by penitence or by doing good. He saw God as a stern judge who demanded impossibilities from him. In the works of Augustine he read that God had preordained only a small number for eternal salvation. The rest, he learned, were doomed by God's predestinating decree. Luther feared that he belonged to the doomed. As his search for a true knowledge of God progressed, he began to look more to Scripture and less to the church fathers.

Luther realized that the theology of his church had in effect disrupted the principle of *Sola Scriptura* as it accepted the church and the Pope as the final interpreters of the Bible. He saw that if any extra-biblical authority has the final word about God's Word, then the Bible can no longer be seen as self-explanatory. Luther also perceived that the spirit of the apostolic church and the simplicity of the gospel had been distorted through years of traditional teaching. The gospel had been lost in an increasingly complicated system of merits, good works, sacraments, and penances so that during the Middle Ages the church was teaching that outside it there could be no salvation. He

saw that the priesthood itself could not bestow the sacramental grace of salvation, as if the ecclesiastical hierarchy had acquired a monopoly on divine grace. He saw that the personal certainty of salvation had been lost.

Luther's crisis of conscience

Luther himself struggled to find personal assurance of salvation, even as he resisted the authoritarian claims of his ecclesiastical superiors. He saw a fundamental difference between the need for Christian freedom of conscience and the dictatorial behavior of the church hierarchy.

When Luther started to study the Psalms in preparation for his lectures, his primary interest was not theoretical but practical. He was searching for an experiential theology, for a saving knowledge of God. His attitude was to seek God's truth rather than to defend tradition.

One of his main stumbling blocks was that he was not able to understand the meaning of the biblical term "the righteousness of God." His Latin Bible had the phrase *justitia Dei*. The term "justitia" was the common word for retributive justice or punishment, as the scholastic theologians taught. In other words, in understanding the word that way, he ended up viewing God as a stern judge.

Because Luther understood the "righteousness of God" as His punishing righteousness, he was unable to explain why David could pray in Psalm 31:1 "Deliver me in your righteousness," and in 143:1, "O Lord, listen to my cry in your righteousness." The word "righteousness" thundered in Luther's ears only as God's wrath and everlasting punishment. Thus Luther wrestled with the wrath of God, and it burned as a consuming fire in his conscience. At last he turned to the New Testament for comfort. Romans 1:16 arrested him: "The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." Salvation! Luther was thrilled. Was this the essence, the secret he had been searching for? He read on: "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed . . ." (verse 17). Luther couldn't understand. Was the apostle tell-

ing him that even the gospel is a revelation of God's justice? How could Paul call the gospel "justice"? Was this another manifestation of the law? If it was, then the gospel also condemned the sinner. Was "justice" not the treatment God gives to each one according to what one deserves? Luther groaned, "Who can love an angry and condemning God?" As Jacob, he wrestled with God. He studied. He tried to understand the expression "the righteousness of God" but no one opened the door for him.

What was new about Luther's discovery was that he identified God's righteousness and Christ's righteousness as one, and saw that this divine righteousness is received by faith already now!

Luther discovers the gospel

A Bible lay open in his little study as he was preparing his class lectures. The question in his mind was, How could Paul call the gospel itself the "righteousness of God"?

Luther read again the text in relation to its context. He came to Romans 3:21: "But now a righteousness from God, *apart from law*, has been made known . . ." Suddenly his vision cleared. By the grace of God he saw what Paul meant: the righteousness was not something God required humans to offer to Him, but something God *offered* to humans who believed the gospel—it was a marvelous expression of the grace of

God! God offers the personal righteousness of Christ as His divine gift to the believer now! That is the salvation of the gospel. God justifies the repentant human being through the righteousness of Christ. This means that the gospel does not demand work or sinless perfection from us, but offers to us the gracious gift of His own work and perfect righteousness. By His grace He justifies us and announces us righteous.

When Luther understood this truth, his conscience was freed from the weight of guilt and he became a free person. Now the Psalms tasted good. Later, Luther described his discovery this way: "It seemed to me as if I had been born again and was entering into paradise through newly opened doors. All at once, the Bible began to speak in quite a different way to me. The very phrase, 'righteousness of God,' which I had hated before, was the one that I now loved the best of all. That is how that passage of Paul's became for me the gateway to paradise. At once the whole Scripture showed me another face."¹ For Luther, God's promise that "the just shall live by faith" provided the salvation he was seeking. Paul was quoting the promise from Habakkuk (2:4), but he gave it a new emphasis on *how* a person becomes just or righteous, when he explained: "He shall gain life who is *justified through faith*" (Rom. 1:17, NEB), or, "Anyone who is upright through faith will live" (NJB).

What was new about Luther's discovery was that he identified God's righteousness and Christ's righteousness as one and saw that this divine righteousness is received by faith *already now!* This last point is the teaching of Jesus, when He declared in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector: "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, *went home justified before God* [that day]" (Luke 18:14). This is how all the faithful stand the test of God's final judgment. Luther explained, "That is the long and the short of it: He who believes in the man called Jesus Christ, God's only Son, has eternal life—as He himself says (John 3:16), 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not

perish, but have everlasting life.’”²

Some Luther scholars assert that Luther was the first since Paul to recover the original purity of the gospel of the New Testament. What made Luther the Reformer of the Christian church was the fact that his gospel message was anchored in a sound exegesis of the Bible. Only thus could it have had the lasting value it has for the whole church. The “Gates of Paradise” were opened to Luther, because “the keys of the kingdom” were handed to him once he grasped the central passage of Romans: “He who is righteous by faith, shall live.”

We are saved now and in the judgment by our faith in Christ and in His free gift of righteousness. This caused Luther to write his famous book in 1520, *The Freedom of the Christian*, dedicated to Pope Leo X.

Now all anxiety in seeking to become acceptable to God had ended. Later Ellen White would repeat this assurance in her impressive declaration, “We may enjoy the favor of God. We are not to be anxious about what Christ and God think of us, but about what God thinks of Christ, our Substitute. Ye are accepted in the Beloved.”³

Luther's grasp of the gospel

Luther came to clearer insights as he studied more carefully Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians. These two letters became the two-edged sword of the Protestant Reformation in its battle against the proposing of a system of works-righteousness. Luther used the polemical passages of Paul (Rom. 3:22-26, 28; Gal. 2:21; 3:10; 5:4) directed against the merit system of Pharisaic Judaism in his battle against the merit-seeking theology and piety of the medieval church.

In Romans 3:24 Paul stressed the nature of God's mercy twice when he said “freely by his grace!” This became the hallmark of the Protestant Reformation: “*Sola Gratia!*” But the grace of God was no longer interpreted as the metaphysical fluid of sacramental grace. It was understood again in its pristine apostolic sense of the “unmerited favor of God.” Rejecting the de-personalized

concept of grace put forward by scholastic theologians, Luther joyfully proclaimed the believer's personal acceptance by God.

In Romans 3:28, Paul summed up justification in his historic statement, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” Luther translated Paul's emphasis on justification by faith “without works of law” in the German language by the additional word “alone”: “*allein durch den Glauben*,” “by faith alone.” This was a correct translation and interpretation of Paul's polemic against righteousness-works. Luther's brief formula for justification “by faith alone” became part of the banner of the entire Protestant Reformation: “*Sola Fide*.”

Thus, the Reformation summed up the Protestant faith in three short cries that sounded against the teaching of the church of that day: *Sola Scriptura*—*Sola Gratia*—*Sola Fide!*

Luther, in the meantime, advanced his understanding on justification substantially. With the help of Augustine he discovered that God's righteousness is a divine free gift. But he still thought of the gift merely in terms of an indwelling Christ and a gradually increasing righteousness in the believer. This meant that

the believer was always *partly righteous and partly sinful*. At this point, for Luther justification was seen to be made inwardly righteous.

Further clarification for Luther

Later, in his commentary on Galatians (1535) Luther reached his mature concept of justification: it is *the forensic or legal imputation of Christ's righteousness to the repentant believer*. Now he taught the complete justification of sinners in the forgiveness of their sins. Now his emphasis was on the Christ for us, who died for our sins, and no longer on grace as something infused in the believer. The “alien righteousness” of Christ now became the essence of justification and the basis for the certainty of personal salvation, because it is not a partial but a complete righteousness. We are saved by an alien righteousness, not by our own righteousness! In 1528 Luther said in one of his sermons, “As Adam brought damnation upon us by an alien [to us] sin, so Christ has saved us by an alien righteousness. . . . Our testimony and confession is: Not through yourself but through Christ will you be saved. These two you must distinguish from one another, yourself and Christ. You did not come down from heaven, you

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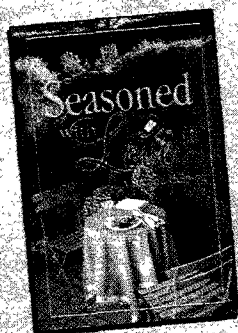
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were not born of Mary, but you were made out of dirt. Therefore Christ's doing is different from yours."⁴ Luther also gave "faith" back its apostolic meaning. Instead of the popular notion that "faith" was an intellectual assent that had to be supplemented by "works," or human behavior of some kind, Luther proclaimed that faith meant a person's act of commitment to God and His Word. Faith saves, not because it is the meritorious act of a person, but because it apprehends and embraces Christ. He is our Saviour, Forgiver, Justifier, and Fulfiller of the law. God accepts believers and reckons them righteous solely on account of Christ and His merits. The believer is justified in Christ! Such faith did not need to be supplemented by works, because such faith worked from the start!

Luther coined a profound phrase, one that has often been misunderstood: the believer in Christ is *simul justus et peccator*, "at the same time just and sinful." He meant to say: in Christ the believer is fully justified, while he remains in himself, that is, in his inherent sinful nature (not: character), fully sinful! He therefore could say with Paul: "We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the

Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:23, 24). Saving faith thus should prevent believers from ever feeling holy in themselves!

Luther, however, certainly did not suggest that a sanctified life is irrelevant or unnecessary. He fully acknowledged that justification is effective in producing sanctification, but he insisted that such good works of the Spirit are not a component part of justification itself. It is justification that creates the new human, not the new human who creates justification.

It is here that we must confront the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification as defined by the Council of Trent in 1546. Trent taught that one's justification must be accomplished by one's own efforts in cooperation with God, and therefore one can never have the comforting assurance that one has been accepted by God. Here is the crux of the matter, as far as Luther was concerned.

Luther as a witness of Christ and the Bible

Luther felt it was basic for others to

share the joy and assurance of redemption. He was a scholar of theology in order to be the most effective evangelist; one who would teach the grace of God and draw people to Christ. He believed that the Bible had to be preached for the gospel to become gospel for his fellow human beings. The written and oral Word are both needed.

When the leaders of Luther's church rejected his discovery of the gospel of free grace and threatened him with excommunication in the bull, *Exsurge Domine* of 1520, he was shocked. On December 10, 1520, he publicly burned the papal bull, together with a copy of the Canon Law, which gave the Pope his powers.

When his friends tried to keep Luther from going to the city of Worms to defend his message before the emperor, because they feared for his life, he replied without hesitation: "Even though there should be as many devils in Worms as shingles on the roof, I would still enter."⁵

The question has justly been asked: How could Luther have been so absolutely convinced that he was right and the whole church wrong? He wrote to a friend, "We cannot attain to the understanding of the Scripture either by study or by the intellect. Your first duty is to begin by prayer. Entreat the Lord to grant you, of His great mercy, the true understanding of His word. There is no other interpreter of the word of God than the Author of this word, as He Himself has said, 'They shall be all taught of God.' Hope for nothing from your own labors, from your own understanding; trust solely in God, and in the influence of His Spirit."⁶

For true reformation to occur, Luther believed implicitly in the victorious power of Scripture, rather than in ecclesiastical pressure, coercion, or legislation. He wrote, "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word, otherwise I did nothing. . . . I did nothing, the Word did everything."⁷

Luther excelled in his preaching and teaching. He exalted preaching to a new significance and gave it a primacy over the sacraments. He insisted that the seven sacraments of the church could not save,

only faith in the preached Word of God saves. He preached during the week and three times on Sundays, starting at five in the morning.

For Luther, preaching was primarily expounding the Word of God. He systematically went through entire books of the Bible, first from the Old Testament, then from the New, always applying the biblical characters in connection with his own experience. By way of example, here is a part of his exposition of Jonah. "How could anyone imagine that a man could be three days and three nights in the belly of the fish without light, without food, absolutely alone, and come out alive? Who would not take this for a fairy tale if it were not in Scripture? But God is even in hell. 'Jonah prayed unto the Lord from the belly of the whale.' I do not believe he could compose such a fine psalm while he was down there, but this shows what he was thinking. He was not expecting salvation. He thought he must die, yet he prayed, 'I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord.' This shows that we must always pray to God. If you can

just cry, your agony is over. Hell is not hell any more if you can cry to God. But no one can believe how hard this is. We can understand wailing, trembling, sighing, doubting, but to cry out, this is what we cannot do. Conscience, sin, and the wrath of God are about our necks. Nature cannot cry out. When Jonah reached the point that he could cry, he had won. Cry unto the Lord in your anguish, and it will be milder. Just cry and nothing else. He does not ask about your merit. Reason does not understand this, and always wants to bring in something to placate God. But there just is nothing to bring. Reason does not believe that all that is needed to quiet God's anger is a cry."⁸

Luther's understanding of the gospel came through a responsible exegesis of Scripture, which gave him a new and liberating experience as a Christian believer. With immense courage, he lifted up Christ above all others. Luther's devotion to the everlasting gospel has been described this way: "He hid behind the Man of Calvary, seeking only to present Jesus as the sinner's Redeemer."⁹ In this

respect, Luther was a true Elijah, and a forerunner of the universal revival and reformation to come into being through the apocalyptic proclamation of the Three Angels of Revelation 14. ■

¹ *Luther's Works*. Concordia Publishing House, vol. 54:105.

² Quoted in H.A. Oberman, *Luther. Man Between God and the Devil*. Doubleday, ET 1992, 153.

³ Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1958), 2:32, 33.

⁴ Quoted in B. Häggglund, *The Background of Luther's Doctrine of Justification in Late Medieval Theology*. Facet Books 18. Fortress Press, 1971, 33.

⁵ Quoted in E.G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*. Concordia Pub. House, 1950, 499.

⁶ In E.G. White, *The Great Controversy*, (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Pub. Assn., 1911), 132.

⁷ Quoted in L. Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious*. Fortress Press, 1959, 102.

⁸ Quoted in R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand. A Life of Martin Luther*. A Mentor Book, MQ 544. The New Am. Lib., 1964, 279, 280.

⁹ White, *The Great Controversy*, 152.

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THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION: One year later

On October 31, 1999, representatives of the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) formally signed a joint statement on the theological issue of justification—an issue that played a crucial role in the debates leading up to the Protestant Reformation.



Raoul Dederen, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of systematic theology and former dean of the SDA Theological Seminary, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

The formal signing took place in Augsburg, Germany, 428 years to the day after Martin Luther nailed his list of 95 theses against the sale of indulgences to a church door in Wittenburg.

Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (PCPCU), signed the document on behalf of the Vatican and described the signing of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ)¹ as “without doubt an outstanding achievement of the ecumenical movement and a milestone on the way to the restoration of full, visible unity among the disciples of our Lord and Saviour.”² Pope John Paul II described the event as marking “a milestone on the not always easy road

towards the restoration of full unity among Christians.”³

Did the Roman Catholic Church accept the Lutheran position? Or did Lutherans surrender Luther’s stance? Can it truthfully be said that the mutual condemnations of the sixteenth century no longer apply?

Five documents hold an important place in the development of the Catholic-Lutheran agreement: (1) the JDDJ itself; (2) the Official Catholic Response (OCR); (3) the Official Common Statement (OCS); (4) an Annex to the former; and (5) a note explaining details of the Annex statement.⁴

The first document was approved by the Lutheran World Federation Council on June 16, 1998. The second

RAOUL DEDEREN

was the Catholic response to the same text, made on June 25, 1998. The last three were issued together in June of the following year.

The Vatican's reaction to the Joint Declaration appalled many observers, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. In June 1998, one week after the LWF Council had approved the document and had stated that the Lutheran condemnations no longer applied to Roman Catholic teaching, Rome's response seemed to call into question the very consensus expressed in the JDDJ. It threw into confusion hopes of an imminent joint signing. Rome expressed its perplexity at some of the statements, declaring some unacceptable as presented and requesting clarifications. It even questioned whether the LWF had the authority to speak on doctrinal issues in the name of its member churches (OCR 7).

Once the "misunderstandings" were cleared, the two parties released a short Official Common Statement and an Annex affirming the JDDJ and responding to certain concerns raised a year earlier, in June 1998. An additional Note was shared by Cardinal Cassidy further addressing questions raised by the Catholic partner in its Official Response. A few months later, the signatories put their names to a volume containing the Joint Declaration, the Official Common Statement, and the Annex.

Common understanding

What is the common understanding of justification as the Joint Declaration sees it? Let me first mention that at the heart of the Declaration is an astounding and compelling statement. It reads: "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works" (JDDJ 15).

The Joint Declaration itself represents a significant progress in mutual understanding. There is much in which Christians, mindful of Christ's longing for His disciples to be one, can rejoice. In the spirit of Vatican II more value is

given to the Scriptures. The section on the "Biblical Message of Sanctification" (JDDJ 8-12) is helpful. Here, both dialogue partners have more in common than what divides them. They are addressing the central point—justification, how to be right with God. They also show a more sympathetic understanding of what the other side was and is saying.

"A consensus in basic truths of the

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activity in the believer?⁷ The
disagreement remains
essentially unresolved.

doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics" in spite of "remaining differences of language, theological elaboration and emphasis" in the understanding of the doctrine, states the JDDJ (40; cf. OCS 1). Some of the latter are even "divergent" and simply "not acceptable" according to the OCR (Declaration 2; Clarification 1).

Divisive themes

Some of these divergent themes⁵ include human involvement in justification, justification as declaration or process, concupiscence, and the Lutheran term "justified and a sinner."

First, the human involvement in the act of justification: The JDDJ explains that human beings have "no freedom in relation to salvation" (19) and, in an explanatory section, Lutherans emphasize that while believers are fully involved personally in their faith, a "person can only receive [mere passive] justification." This means they mean "to exclude any possibility of contributing to one's own justification (JDDJ 21). On the contrary, the Council of Trent (1545-1563), called to formulate a comprehensive response to Luther, taught under anathema that sinners can cooperate in the preparation for and the reception of justification. They do not receive it passively (DS 1154).⁶

How will the two views be harmonized? Shall we suggest that Lutherans use the term "justification" in an active or functional sense, referring to the justifying activity of Christ, whereas Roman Catholics use it in an objective sense, in reference to the transforming effect of Christ's justifying activity in the believer?⁷ The disagreement remains essentially unresolved.

The second issue (justification: a declaration or process?) was probably the most conspicuously divergent between Lutherans and Catholics from the very start. Luther consistently claimed that justification is an event—God *declaring* the sinner righteous on account of and in Christ. Christ's righteousness, "alien" to the sinner, is imputed to him or her. In time, Lutherans began to draw an increasingly sharp distinction between the event of being *declared* righteous (justification) and the process of being *made* righteous (sanctification, regeneration). This perception gave rise to the term "forensic justification," from the Latin *forensis* ("public") and *forum* ("marketplace," "public place," or "courtyard") where the dispensing of justice took place in ancient Rome.

Over against this forensic grasp of

justification that distinguishes between justification and sanctification (JDDJ 26), Roman Catholics, along with Trent, have consistently defined justification as an internal *transformation* of the believer (DN 1528). Justification, “the most excellent work of God,” repeats the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,⁸ “entails the sanctification of [the] whole body” (CCC 1994, 1995). It “includes the remission of sins, sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man” (CCC 2019).

This evident disparity is corroborated by the approach adopted in the case of the next issue, that of concupiscence—the unruly and self-centered spontaneous desires that mark our fallen human nature. Is the unruly inclination that comes from sin and presses us toward sin, indeed sin?

Roman Catholic doctrine holds that thanks to God’s infused justifying grace, Original Sin is eradicated by baptism and sinners are made righteous, as we noted above (CCC 2023). A true change has occurred. Concupiscence, which stems from the effects of Original Sin and inclines us to sin (CCC 11264, 1426, 2515), however, is not sin. “Catholics do not see this inclination as sin in an authentic sense.” It “does not separate the justified person from God” (JDDJ 30). In fact, the Council of Trent condemned under anathema whoever would hold the view that concupiscence is sin (DS 1515).

Lutherans, by contrast affirm that the justified person, accounted righteous, continues to be involved in a battle between the Spirit and the sin that remains in us. Sin still lives in . . . Hence, the believer can be rightly described as *simul justus et peccator*, i.e. at once righteous and sinner.

The Official Catholic Response, though rather blunt, declared that this view is “not acceptable” (OCR 1), adding, quite understandably, that “it remains difficult to see how . . . we can say that this doctrine of ‘simul justus et peccator’ is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decree on original sin and justification” (OCR 1). The Vatican seems to see a serious problem in this divergence.

Justification and indulgences

The doctrine of justification, however, is not a purely academic matter. It touches the practices of the church. It has obvious relevance to church life and practice, including, for Roman Catholics, one’s view on purgatory, the assistance of Mary and the saints in the life of salvation, as well as indulgences. Where is the connection?

Catholic doctrine teaches that sin, as rebellion against God, has enduring consequences from which one must be

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purified. To begin with, sin involves deprivation of communion with God. To the repentant sinner, however, God, in His mercy, grants pardon and remission of the “eternal punishment” it would bring. Besides, since sin entails a destructive attachment to temporal things, the repentant sinner must be purified either here on earth or after death in purgatory. This purification cleanses the sinner from the “temporal punishment” of sin and removes what ever still impedes full communion with God and with other believers.

In this context, indulgences entail

remission, partial or plenary, of the temporal punishment in purgatory still due to sins that have already been forgiven. This remission is the privilege of the church, which authoritatively dispenses and applies the treasury of the satisfactions won by Christ and the saints. Believers may obtain partial or plenary indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead.⁹

In the early sixteenth century such practices and beliefs lent weight to the selling of indulgences and the remission of purgatory penalties. Such practices may have been in conflict with the teaching of more responsible leaders of the church but few serious efforts were made to suppress them. In recent years Pope Paul VI’s 1967 *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* and John Paul II’s 1998 bull *Incarnationis Mysterium* have sought to avoid any commercial overtures.

Do indulgences still play a role in Roman Catholicism today? John Paul II, who deplored the abuses of indulgences in the 1998 bull, unhesitatingly decreed during the Jubilee of the year 2000 that “all the faithful, properly prepared, be able to make abundant use of the [divine] gift of the indulgence,” whether partial or plenary, “which is one of the constitutive elements of the jubilee.”¹⁰ Indulgences do still play a role in Roman Catholicism today.

It might be argued that indulgences encourage believers to acts of devotion, charity, and works of mercy. But don’t indulgences and purgatory and prayer for the dead inexorably call into question the doctrine of justification? There may be some confusion among Roman Catholic theologians as to what the role of indulgences really is, but how could one dismiss indulgences as some cryptic and antiquated practice that has no meaning today and certainly no relevance in an ecumenical discussion on the doctrine of justification?

Should one conclude that when he issued his indiction bull in 1998 John Paul II was unaware of the fact that the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* was being prepared with his approval and would be signed the following year? I don’t think that the

Roman Catholic Church was intending to indulge in double talk.¹¹ But I do wonder if the claim is true that the basic issues debated at the time of the Reformation have in fact been resolved.

Substantial differences persist

I can understand why Roman Catholics wanted and still want clarifications. I, too, want clarifications, some from Catholics and others from Lutherans, before being able to say that Lutherans have not capitulated to the Roman Catholic view. Nor do I feel reassured when I learn the answer Cardinal Cassidy gave to a question brought up by journalists in Augsburg before the official signing of the Joint Declaration. Asked whether there was anything in the JDDJ contrary to the Council of Trent, Cardinal Cassidy answered: "Absolutely not, otherwise how could we do it?"¹²

Not surprisingly, not all Lutherans felt it possible to reconcile the Joint Declaration to the Confessions of their respective churches. In the United States, the large Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, though a full member of the dialogue, did not feel able to sign the document. To A. L. Barry, its president, the agreement is "a betrayal of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."¹³ Some 245 German Lutheran scholars likewise expressed their great concerns and reservations regarding the JDDJ.¹⁴ Forty-three of the 124 LWF member churches did not support the Joint Declaration, while 30 of the Lutheran churches, worldwide, that are not members of the LWF, shared the same objections.¹⁵

At the same time the co-signatories have committed themselves to continue the dialogue "in order to reach full church communion, a unity in diversity, in which remaining differences would be

reconciled and no longer have a divisive force" (OCS 3). They will, most probably, seek to fit their confessional statements in a single coherent system.

Biblical and ecclesiastical integrity

The easier road to take in these days of agnosticism and postmodern relativism, is to simply acknowledge that we have two systems that have unfolded from the Scriptures, the creeds and tradition, which express themselves through different thought-forms and "languages," and that together we must bring them side by side, attached by mutual respect, spurning any inclination to insist on absolute agreement.¹⁶

But is this a sound approach? Can one really claim that two or more contradictory theological statements can best serve the cause of Christian unity? Some of the differences we are facing in the Joint Document are not simply matters of language or emphasis. They are not even just differences in the theological expressions of the faith. Instead they are differences in the faith itself. They concern aspects of substance, and they are hardly compatible (cf. OCR 5). They are not convergent but contradictory and divergent, in matters not only of doctrine but of church life and practice. Consensus declarations such as the one under review too often carry with them the scent of compromise. They imperil the integrity of the church.

There is much good in the fact that Lutherans and Catholics are engaging in dialogue. As partners in dialogue, they will continue to learn from one another and correct one another's oversights. But the only way partners in dialogue will ever be able to make significant inroads in their dialogues with one another is by expressly, even strictly, confining their

discussions to the Scriptures. Ecclesial "rapprochement" should not be obtained at the expense of truth, that is, biblical truth. ■

¹ For a responsible English version of the JDDJ see *Origins* vol. 28: no. 8 (July 16, 1998). *Origins* is published by the National Catholic News Services, Washington, D.C., and sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

² At a Rome press conference on June 25, 1998. *Origins* id., 128.

³ *Ecumenical News International Bulletin*, no. 20, Nov. 10, 1999, 32.

⁴ For an English version of all five documents see *Origins* vol. 28: no. 8 (July 16, 1998): 120-127; 130-132; vol. 29: no. 6 (June 24, 1999): 86-89.

⁵ Various points in this article have been drawn from Avery Dulles' cautionary piece "Two Languages of Salvation: The Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration," *First Things*, No. 98 (Dec. 1999): 25-30.

⁶ All statements by the Council of Trent are taken from Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum* 32nd to 36th editions. Hereafter: DS.

⁷ As does Richard J. Schlenker, "The Lutheran-Catholic 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification' (June 1998)," *Ecumenical Trends* vol. 28, no. 5 (May 1999), 14.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Latin text copyright, rev. edition. Cita del Vaticano, 1997.

⁹ *New Code of Canon Law*. Latin-English ed. Washington, D.C.: Canon Law Society of America, 1983; cans. 992, 994.

¹⁰ "John Paul II/Bull of Indiction Year 2000 *Incarnationis Mysterium*," *Origins* vol. 28: no. 26 (Dec. 10, 1998): 446-452. The conditions for gaining the Jubilee indulgence are stipulated in an "Appendix by the Apostolic Penitentiary," id.: 452, 453.

¹¹ My point is borrowed from David Mashman's article "Is the Reformation Over?" in *The Lutheran Witness*, Nov. 1999, 24.

¹² *Ecumenical News International Bulletin*, no. 20, Nov. 10, 1999, 36.

¹³ "Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod press release," October 15, 1999.

¹⁴ "Supporting Documentation for the Statement 'Toward True Reconciliation,'" a duplicated 30-page-long document prepared by Paul T. McCain, Assistant to the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, [St. Louis], January 13, 2000, 12-24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-28.

¹⁶ As eloquently developed by Avery Dulles, the veteran ecumenist: "Two Languages of Salvation: The Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration," *First Things*, Dec. 1999, 25-30. See also John J. McDonnell, "The Agreed Statement on Justification. A Roman Catholic Perspective," *Ecumenical Trends*, vol. 28: no. 5 (May 1999), 7-8; Richard J. Schlenker, "The Lutheran-Catholic 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification'" (June 1998), 12-14.



A REVIEW OF THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOGMA OF JUSTIFICATION

Dialogue since the second Vatican Council between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran churches has led to an unmistakable rapprochement not only in the realm of ecclesiastical life, but also in the arena of doctrine.



Hans Heinz, Th.D., is a retired professor of theology at Marienhohe Seminary, Germany

This includes above all the main article of the Lutheran Reformation, the tenet of justification, by which, according to Reformation Protestant conviction, the church stands or falls.

Luther, the Council of Trent, and justification

For Luther justification was the “main article”¹ and the “sum of Christian doctrine.”² According to his own confession, he had lost Christ due to the impact of the Catholic Church’s theology of the late middle-ages, but rediscovered Him again through his study of the Apostle Paul. Luther was well aware of the fact that what he had discovered was “new,” but he was con-

vinced that, after the church had taught a nonbiblical righteousness by works for centuries, he was again connecting with Paul; “my Paul,” as he put it.

The Council of Trent (1545-63), which on the one hand removed certain abuses, such as the sale of indulgences, continued, on the other hand, to draw a marked dividing line between the teaching of the Catholic Church and that of the Reformers. The Council clearly identified the doctrine of justification as the principal reason for the separation between the confessions. From the start (1547) it delivered an exhaustive definition of the Catholic dogma of justification with pointed arguments against the “heretics.”³ Trent also made it clear that

its aim was to stamp out the heresy⁴ it saw in the teaching of the Reformers. In the canons concerning the decree on justification, the Reformation was anathematized, without actually calling the Reformers by name. Trent affirmed that the memory of Luther and Calvin should fall into eternal oblivion *damnatio memoriae* and their religious conviction forever be “anathema.” That is how the statement of the Council has been understood for 400 years.

Thus, amid the change illustrated by and emanating from the *Joint Declaration on the Dogma of Justification*, the objective question remains and indeed now clamors for an answer: Who, if not the Reformers and their teachings, were the heretics of the sixteenth century with their false teaching on justification and what, if anything, has in fact altered since then to suggest the kind of rapprochement gathering in the wake of the document we are reviewing?

The outlook today

These days, of course, both sides refer to the fact that Luther had not only said, “We are and remain eternally divided,”⁵ but also that if the pope could admit that God justifies only through His mercy in Christ, “then we would not only carry him on our hands, but also kiss his feet.”⁶

Since Catholic theologians today present Luther’s concern in regard to justification as “Catholic truth” (Y. Congar) and his teaching as “more Catholic than previously assumed” (J. Lortz), new perspectives seem to be emerging. Some Catholic theologians appear almost lyrical when speaking of Luther today. “The legacy of Luther must be brought back to the Catholic Church” (J. Lortz), Luther must receive “right of residence” (O. H. Pesch), because his thinking is a “unique word-and-event theology” (A. Brandenburg) that could be a “liberating aid” (J. Brosseder) in the fight against every form of new scholasticism.

Catholic ecumenical thinkers such as Hans Küng and O. H. Pesch classify Luther’s teaching on justification as a “return to the Gospel.” Consequently, they

demand categorically that the church learn from Luther. They interpret the Catholic teaching on justification in such a way that there can be no longer any reason for the separation between the churches.

The Joint Declaration itself

Climactic in this ecumenical endeavor, of course, has been the *Joint Declaration on the Dogma of Justification* 1997, a document—abbreviated here as JD or *Joint Declaration*, published by the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. It culminates in the declaration of a “Consensus on the Fundamentals of the Dogma of Justification,”⁷ and states that further valid differences on the way to “visible unity”⁸ may not be used to condemn one another’s teachings.⁹ This document certainly reveals a high degree of accord. But it achieves this, with some apparent deliberation, through frequent inaccuracies and by the use of some misleading statements. Whoever has endeavored to familiarize

themselves to some degree with Paul’s teaching on justification, as Luther understood it, must ask the question: Have not the essential points of the Reformers’ teaching been compromised and in fact misrepresented or altered through this kind of ecumenical endeavor?

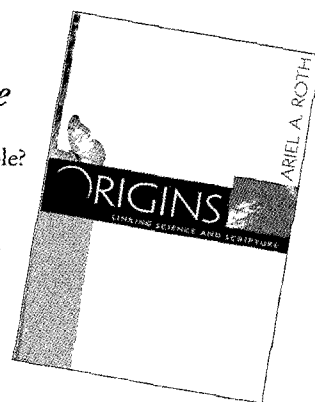
Inaccuracies?

Inaccuracies are observable from the beginning of the document where justification is, biblically speaking, properly defined as the “forgiveness of sins”¹⁰ and where “forgiveness and making right”¹¹ are placed together as the Catholic position. Problems begin to show themselves when one realizes that nowhere in the document is it said that the two (forgiveness and making right) contradict one another, since “making right” (sanctification) is seen in the Bible to be the result of justification, so that although good works are necessary, they are not necessary for salvation. In Catholic teaching however, making right—which is manifested by works—is necessary for salvation;¹² while in the

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teaching of the Reformation they only bear witness to salvation. The gospel sees good works as a consequence of salvation, while in Catholic teaching they are a means to salvation. In other words, according to Catholic teaching, good works do not happen because of salvation, but they lead to salvation.¹³ This crucial distinction is not pointed out in the document.

When the *Joint Declaration* speaks about justification by faith,¹⁴ it is mentioned that the Pauline *sola fide* (by faith alone) was the Reformers' position, but nowhere is it said that this position is incompatible with the Catholic position, which remains in fact, one which affirms that justification comes by both faith and works.¹⁵

Justification by faith alone means full salvation here and now—and therefore completed justification and with it the assurance of salvation. Justification by faith and works, on the other hand, means an incomplete justification¹⁶ and therefore there is hope but no assurance or certainty of salvation. Those who "through the observance of God's law and the Church's laws are constantly more justified,"¹⁷ cannot be sure of salvation, since they do not know whether or not they have completely fulfilled all that is needed.

Further, Paul's "by faith alone" (Rom. 3:28)—as Luther understood it—is incompatible with a justification of faith and love.¹⁸ Paul nowhere speaks of a justification by love because love is for him a witness to faith (Gal. 5:6). Justification by love is justification already transformed into sanctification, which again has good works not in order to be saved but as a witness to salvation.

Although the *Joint Declaration* constantly stresses that justification cannot be earned,¹⁹ it does not say that according to Catholic understanding this refers only to the initial justification received at baptism. According to Catholic dogma, final justification in the judgment must "truly be earned."²⁰ Even though necessary works are a gift of grace, says the Catholic position, they are at the same time man's "good merits."²¹ The reason for taking this position

is that Trent defined grace as "inherent grace,"²² which is therefore the possession of the believer.

This was not the Reformation position, which saw both the saving grace and the works that save to be those of Christ, Himself, quite aside from the believer. Even though the document constantly asserts that grace is not a "possession" but a "gift"²³ (and no biblically oriented Christian would disagree with that assertion in and of itself), yet when reading

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the *Joint Declaration* we must nevertheless ask on the basis of the evidence in the document, whether the Catholic position is fully and correctly represented to the reader.

That a true Christian will help his fellowman and glorify God through obedience belongs to the ABCs of Christianity. However, that this obedience, which includes obedience to the rules of the church, will constantly make the Christian more righteous,²⁴ thus con-

tributing to salvation, no Protestant is able to accept. The *Joint Declaration* states that the laws of the church can also be affirmed by Protestants, when they "validate God's Commandments."²⁵ The question is, can this also be said concerning such actions as the duty of confession, where the priest absolves from sin?²⁶

It is impossible to see the condemnatory judgments coming down from the Council of Trent as mere "warnings,"²⁷ as the *Joint Declaration* interprets them to be. For example, looking at the Trent judgment against the Reformation positions on *sola fide*,²⁸ on the confidence of faith,²⁹ on justification as imputed or accounted righteous,³⁰ and on the assurance of salvation,³¹ in all honesty, one cannot say that these were only "warnings"³² as the *Joint Declaration* reinterprets them to be. An anathema is not a warning, but an unequivocal judgment of condemnation.

The *Joint Declaration* maintains that condemnations in regard to the doctrine of justification have become irrelevant.³³ This could mean either the decrees of Trent are no longer valid—which is clearly not the case—or that the whole truth is no longer being told so that the ecumenical cause may be promoted. The problem is that this degree of ambiguity does not help the ordinary believer, who is likely to be confused and misled by it.

Protestant scholars evaluate the Joint Declaration

Heike Schmoll, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*,³⁴ has called this confusing approach "cheating-ecumenism." It is not surprising that more than 150 Professors of Theology in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria have formulated arguments against it or have rejected the whole undertaking. Among them are such well-known names as Eberhard Jüngel, Ingo U. Dalferth, Gerhard Ebeling, Reinhard Schwarz, Karin Bornkam, and Dorothea Wendebourg.

Meanwhile, the *Joint Declaration* has developed a history of its own. In June 1998, Rome published a "note" as part of the *Council of Unity* in which,

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according to Cardinal J. Ratzinger, consensus in regard to "fundamental truths" is avowed, but certain critical aspects of the Lutheran position, such as the passive reception of justification and thus the denial of merits, the justification of sinners, *simul justus et peccator* [at the same time righteous and sinful], as well as justification as the principle criterion of the church, remain condemned by the *anathemata* of the Council of Trent.³⁵

This note produced a considerable stir in the Lutheran World Federation and beyond that in the Protestant world. Johannes Dantine spoke of "the end of the ecumenical consensus," and Reinhard Freiling referred to the "immobility of Rome." The Reformed (Calvinistic) professor of dogmatics—Ulrich Körtner—goes so far as to say that Rome's ecumenism is the "antithesis to ecumenism." A statement of appeasement from the Catholic side was issued by Cardinal Cassidy, who in spite of the reminder of the *anathemata* of Trent,

expressed his conviction that Rome would sign the *Joint Declaration*.

In the meantime both sides have attempted to remove the offending items through a "joint official statement" (June 1999) concerning the *Joint Declaration*. This statement became possible because those on the Protestant side compromised the Reformation view of sin. For Luther, indwelling human sin (Rom. 7:18-23) is a transpersonal power, through which humanity is totally alienated and constantly drawn away from God. According to Luther this alienation is so pervasive that no one is able to do good before God. Thus, in a theological sense (Col. 2:13) human beings are dead, morally speaking. Because of this the human being is unable to contribute anything toward his or her salvation (Eph. 2:8, 9).

For these reasons justification, forgiveness before God, and acceptance as God's child is most certainly the "justification of the sinner" (Rom. 4:5). For the same reason the good works of the believer, or the holy character of the child of God follows justification rather than causing it. And while good works are necessary, they are not necessary for salvation. But it is also true that these works are nevertheless just as much a gift of God as justification itself (Eph. 2:10).

The Council of Trent audaciously attempted to correct Paul's position by declaring that it was not ready to follow Paul, calling sin in Romans 7:20 by its right name. Thus the Catholic position is that concupiscence [lust] is only the result of the loss of original grace and therefore actually something secondary; not the power of sin but only the "fuel" for sin.³⁶ Since according to Catholic teaching, humanity is sacramentally cleansed from sin through baptism, God actually justifies sinless human beings. Cardinal Ratzinger made this clear when he said: "When one is not just, he is also not justified." By agreeing that a Christian is no longer a sinner, the representatives of the World Lutheran Federation have come closer to the understanding of the Council of Trent in this matter. Cardinal Ratzinger said, "The Lutherans indeed move in the direction

of Trent." Thus, it became possible to sign the *Joint Declaration* with its commentary ("Joint official statement"). It is of special interest to note that this signing took place on October 31, 1999, on Reformation Day, and in Augsburg.

Fundamental questions remain

The agreement implied in this signing is still not a "general consensus." Many questions remain, such as the basic question of how *sola fide*, mentioned in the "Joint official statement," relates to the explicit condemnation passed down at Trent. Along with this, there are serious unaddressed issues related to the seminal matter of whether grace is extrinsic or inherent and the matter of the nature and role of "merits."

According to I. U. Dalferth, both documents (Catholic and Lutheran) "speak a common language without having a common understanding,"³⁷ and the suspicion of J. Baur³⁸ has validity, that the whole process is an enterprise in "ecclesiastical diplomatic slyness" that disguises a remaining fundamental dissent. ■

¹ Weimar edition of Luther's Works, 40 III, 366, 24.

² Ibid., 352, 2.

³ Denzinger-Hunermann, *Compendium of Creeds and Dogmatic Decisions of the Church*, 1533.

⁴ Ibid., 1500.

⁵ Weimar, 50, 204, 19, 20.

⁶ Weimar, 401, 181, 11-13.

⁷ A *Joint Declaration on the Dogma of Justification* Produced by the Lutheran World Federation and the Papal Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, 5.

⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹¹ Ibid., 27.

¹² Denzinger-Hunermann, 1535.

¹³ Ibid., 1582.

¹⁴ *Joint Declaration*, 11:16.

¹⁵ Denzinger-Hunermann, 1535.

¹⁶ "Growing justification," Denzinger-Hunermann, 1535.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ *Joint Declaration*, 15; 17.

²⁰ *Vere mereri*, Denzinger-Hunermann, 1582.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 1547.

²³ *Joint Declaration*, 27.

²⁴ Denzinger-Hunermann, 1535.

²⁵ *Joint Declaration* to 4.15.

²⁶ *Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church*, 2042.

²⁷ *Joint Declaration*, 42.

²⁸ Denzinger-Hunermann, 1559.

²⁹ Ibid., 1562.

³⁰ Ibid., 1561.

³¹ Ibid., 1533, 1534.

³² *Joint Declaration*, 42.

³³ Ibid., 5.

³⁴ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, No. 133, June 12, 1998.

³⁵ Compare *Materialdienst*—Publication of the Denominational Institute, Bensheim, 49 [1998]:63-67.

³⁶ Denzinger-Hunermann, 1515.

³⁷ *Materialdienst*, 50 (1999).

³⁸ *Frei durch Rechtfertigung*: Tübingen 1999, 68, 76.

FINDINGS OF THE REPORT ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

An interview with John Graz



John Graz, Ph.D., is director of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.



Willmore D. Eva, D.Min., is the editor of Ministry and associate secretary of the General Conference Ministerial Association.

Will Eva: John, why is there a Report on Religious Freedom in the first place? What is its significance?

John Graz: There are two major reports on the state of religious freedom worldwide: the United Nations Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights Report,¹ given every year, and the annual report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom.² Our report is a supplementary resource for both. To establish a general world report is a huge undertaking; thus, all reliable resources are welcomed. In publishing our own report,³ we strive to disclose violations of religious freedom and to encourage countries to protect and defend the fundamental principle of religious freedom.

WE: How are these reports, including yours, useful for the cause of religious freedom?

JG: One cannot expect that a report will change oppression and persecution

in a few days, but we are living in a world whose countries are increasingly linked. The democratic countries, and especially the United States of America, have a leadership role. Most of the countries need communication and help to benefit, in one way or another, from the economic prosperity of the West. Human rights violations, including religious persecution, are seen as dark stains and create problems for good relations between countries.

The situation is something like a person's desire to become the member of a respected club. Just as the person is applying for membership, a newspaper reveals that they abuse their children. In our reports, we give an account of a country's record with respect to their signature under the *International Bill of Rights*.⁴ Of course, when a government is mentioned and is listed as a persecutor, that government reacts.

WE: Could this not increase the danger for believers under such governments?

JG: What is more dangerous is for a government to claim that it offers religious freedom, when it is well known that it doesn't. If the report is not correct, it is easy enough to disprove. If, which is most often the case, the report is correct, the government will have to explain its policy and actions against religious freedom.

Such a report may open a fruitful dialogue between persecutor and the persecuted. Our purpose in making these reports is not to attack a government, but to help it realize that not only is something wrong in its country but that other nations know that something is wrong.

Those who persecute must come to understand that there is strong solidarity with the innocent, and that it is totally unacceptable to persecute someone because of his or her religious faith and beliefs.

WE: Some would argue that religious freedom opens the door to a multiplication of harmful and dangerous cults. How does this fit into your thinking?

JG: That's a loaded and difficult question. Let me begin with what I believe is the best definition of religious freedom. It is found in Article 18 of the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* voted by acclamation December 10, 1948. It states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

This article is present in many national constitutions and international treaties. It is also developed in the *United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Beliefs and Religions*.⁵ The comment of Article 18 voted by the United Nations states that religious freedom is a fundamental freedom that must be respected, even in the

case of a national emergency.⁶

Having said that, we have to mention the limits of religious freedom. As for every kind of freedom, there are limits. Having religious freedom does not mean you can do everything you want on behalf of religion.

In their teachings, most religions draw their own borders. If you love your neighbor you must respect him. You cannot lie, steal, or kill. The limits to religious freedom set by the *Interna-*

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tional Bill of Rights are family, health, public order, and other similar principles. We do agree, though, that often those terms can be hard to define exactly and that the issue can become difficult, especially in the context of some cults. We must recall that in its earliest days, Christianity could have been deemed a dangerous cult. In fact, in the Roman Empire, it was. Yet, all things considered, the protection of religious freedom is definitely the better option.

WE: In your Report 2000, you mentioned an Adventist church building destroyed by the authorities in Turkmenistan in the Russian Federation. Why did that happen?

JG: In the early 1990s, when the Adventist community was recognized by the State, they began to build a church—the only one in Turkmenistan. In 1994, a new law required all churches and religious groups to re-register. The Adventists should have been re-registered, according to the new laws, but the authorities put obstacles in the way of the church until the deadline had passed. They then decided to destroy the building because the church was not re-registered and thus was not "recognized."⁷

Turkmenistan is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe; they signed through the former Soviet Union the Helsinki Final Act, including Principle VII on religious freedom. In destroying a church building, the nation violated that principle. Their membership is contested by many European countries and by the United States.

WE: Turkmenistan has a majority of Muslims. Are all Muslim countries opposed to religious freedom?

JG: In our report, Category 5 is the category given to those countries with no religious freedom whatsoever. The countries listed are predominantly Islamic. In Category 4, the countries listed are Muslim. But, we must by no means say that Islam or the Muslims are against religious freedom. Most do not have the same concept that we have about religious freedom. Yet we must never forget that during certain times and in many situations, Islam has been far more tolerant toward religious minorities than has Christianity. Religious freedom is a relatively new concept in Christendom.

Intolerance can come from any religion. Buddhism and Hinduism, which are known for tolerance, are not an exception either. Some governments are forcing Christians to become Buddhists,

while extremist Hindus are persecuting Christians in India. Christians have in the past been persecutors, and many of those persecuted were fellow Christians who believed differently from their persecutors on some point. Christian kingdoms have not always been models of tolerance and religious freedom!

WE: Your report also focuses on a few European countries persecuting religious minorities. Is the term "persecution" appropriate in a democracy?

JG: In publishing an official list of sects and cults believed to be potentially dangerous, France and Belgium have shelved or forgotten their commitment to religious freedom. It is unthinkable that such respected democracies and human rights advocates have initiated this kind of action. In France, there is a commission against sects that periodically updates the list.⁸ The first anti-sect law was voted December 10, 1998, right on the 50th Anniversary of the *United Nations Declaration of Human Rights*. This kind of law causes one to wonder if those who enacted it are no longer conscious of Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration! In any case, the result is that almost every religious minority in France has problems; even if they are not listed.

What concerns me is that those who are fighting so-called sects are blinded by their anti-religious presuppositions and biases. They claim to protect and defend human rights, but they seem to have little relevant understanding of the religious dimension. This leads me to a disturbing conclusion: That it is possible for countries with a strong democratic heritage to persecute people, in good conscience and with admirable motivation. That is, people can be persecuted on behalf of the truth, on behalf of cultural identity. Thus, the time may come when believers will be persecuted in the name of human rights.

WE: Does this mean that in traditionally "free" societies, religion may in the future no longer be seen as a fundamental freedom?

JG: I will never forget the answer of a headmaster in a French public secondary school. He decided with his board to reject any registration of students who ask for Saturdays off from school because of religious reasons. Young Adventists were concerned, but the officer said that "if we allow giving Saturday off for the Adventists, we will have to do the same for those who want to play football, or go fishing. . . ." For him, a religious conviction was the same as a sport or leisure activity, nothing more!

Fortunately, in the same town, the headmaster of another public school took the opposite position. For him, religious convictions were serious enough, and he sought to help the students. It means that there is hope, and everywhere religious freedom has supporters.

WE: Several countries are commended for their improvement on religious freedom. That is good news.

JG: Yes. You will find 132 countries listed in Categories 1 and 2, which is the majority. Italy, Spain, Poland, and most of the countries in South America have improved their level of religious freedom. The United States of America is concerned about the issue of religious freedom abroad and has raised its voice,

often but not always, where persecution arises. There is good support from several governments, which encourage us to organize seminars, symposiums, and world congresses around the globe. We have friends everywhere, in every country and in every religion. In working together, we shall make a significant difference. Religious freedom is a basic human right, a fundamental freedom, and we have to protect, defend, and promote it everywhere for everyone. It is a Christian task. But it is also a mission of and in behalf of the human spirit. ■

Note: To obtain a copy of the Religious Freedom World Report 2000, write to GC-PARL, 12501 Old Columbia Pike, Silver Spring, Maryland 20904, or visit the IRLA Web page: www.IRLA.org

¹ www.unhchr.ch

² www.uscirf.gov

³ Religious Freedom World Report 2000, Silver Spring, Md., August 2000.

⁴ See "Religion and Human Rights: Basic Documents," Center for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University, 1998.

⁵ *Idem.*, 101, 102. Article 6 gives an explanation of what religious freedom means!

⁶ *Idem.*, 92-95. United Nations Human Rights Committee General Comment, No. 22.

⁷ Compass Direct, Nov. 16, 1999.

⁸ Alain Gest and Jacques Guyard, "Les Sectes en France." Rapport 2468, Assemblée Nationale, December 20, 1995.

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301.680.6513

E-MAIL ADDRESS

massenburgg@gc.adventist.org

74532.532@compuserve.com

johnsonp@gc.adventist.org

norcottj@gc.adventist.org

drapers@gc.adventist.org

calbij@gc.adventist.org

stangoj@gc.adventist.org

paynec@gc.adventist.org

lowes@gc.adventist.org

Fax number for all departments: 301.680.6502

Web site: www.ministerialassociation.com

JUSTIFICATION IN LUTHERANISM AND CATHOLICISM:

From conflict to conversation

On October 31, 1999, in Augsburg, Germany, representatives from the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church signed the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,”¹ in which they affirmed:



*Roger S. Evans, Ph.D.,
is assistant professor of
church history at Payne
Theological Seminary,
Pickerington, Ohio.*

1) “In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God” (15).

2) “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part” (15).

3) “We confess together that all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation” (19).

4) “We confess together that God forgives sin by grace and at the same time frees human beings from sin’s enslaving power” (22).

5) “We confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ” (25).

6) “We confess together that in baptism the Holy Spirit unites one with

Christ, justifies and truly renews the person” (28).

7) “We confess together that persons are justified by faith in the gospel ‘apart from works prescribed by the law’ (31).

8) “We confess together that good works—a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love—follow justification and are its fruits” (37).

To hear Lutherans and Catholics voicing common confessions on the doctrine of justification is something that could not have been imagined before Vatican II. Statements, which in the sixteenth century brought condemnations and charges of heresy, are now seen, according to this document, as merely “opposing interpretations and applications

of the biblical message of justification" (13). According to the document, both communions have been able "to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ," which shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer "the occasion for doctrinal condemnations" (5).² While realizing that there are "remaining differences," which need "further clarification," there is still a great deal of "consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification" (13).

In the light of these agreements, it is important to ask, Just what were the issues that first caused the Protestant Reformation, and what does this historic document do to help heal more than 400 years of hostility and theological division regarding the question of justification by faith?

Faith alone?

In the sixteenth century, the Lutheran position on justification was straightforward. In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Philip Melancthon wrote, "We will show that faith [and nothing else] justifies" and "faith alone makes of an unjust, a just man, i.e., receives remission of sin" (4.2). In the same document, he says that "the promise of the remission of sins and of justification has been given us for Christ's sake" (4.2). *The Formula of Concord* states that people "are justified and saved alone by faith in Christ" (3.10). Martin Luther wrote, "[We] are saved only by faith, without any good works, therefore faith alone justifies" (304). And, "We are justified before God altogether without works, and obtain forgiveness of sins merely by grace" (300).

During the Reformation, Catholics charged Lutherans with boasting in their "confidence and certainty of the remission of . . . sins" when in reality "no one can know with a certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God."³ No attempt was made by the Lutherans to deny these charges. In the *Formula of Concord* they wrote, "God forgives us our sins out of pure grace, without any

work, merit, or worthiness of ours preceding, present, or following. . . . He presents and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which righteousness we are received into grace by God, and regarded as righteous" (3.4). And Martin Luther stated, "He that can say: 'I am a child of God through Christ, who is my righteousness; and despairs not, though he be deficient in good works, which always fail us, he believes rightly.'"⁴

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theological division?

Therefore, for sixteenth-century Protestants, justification comes from God through Christ, in that God does not impute our sins to us, but instead imputes to us Christ's righteousness. The believer was seen to be declared just before God by God, and that justification was obtained through faith alone in Christ alone. Thus, justification was seen by them to be a gift that was promised and given to the believer.

The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* [AAC] says, "By faith itself, we are for Christ's sake accounted righteous, or are acceptable to God" (4). And the *Formula of Concord* states that "the

word justify means . . . to declare free from sins" (7). Justification itself does not involve renewal, sanctification, or good works. These all follow the act of justification. "Love and works must follow faith. Wherefore, they are not excluded so as not to follow, but confidence in the merit of love or of works is excluded in justification."⁵

Melancthon in the AAC, after explaining what Lutherans believed, wrote, "And of [our] faith not a syllable exists in the doctrine of our adversaries. Hence we find fault with the adversaries, equally because they teach only the righteousness of the Law and because they do not teach the righteousness of the Gospel, which proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ" (4). And later in the same document he said, "Therefore, those who deny that faith justifies, teach nothing but the law, both Christ and the Gospel set aside" (4).

The view from Rome

Of course, the Catholics did teach and write about righteousness and justification by faith, and they did not see themselves setting aside either Christ or the gospel. In the "Decree on Justification," chapter 2, the Catholics said that "God has proposed [Christ] as a propitiator, through faith in his blood, for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for those of the whole world." Chapter 6 reads: "God justifies the impious by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." And in chapter 8: "Faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and the root of all justification."

These were statements that the Lutherans would affirm. The more difficult statements were those concerning the place and merit of good works in the economy of salvation. However, much of the difference between the Protestants and Catholics of the Reformation period can be better understood when it is remembered that, for Catholics, justification is more of a process than an act. Faith and grace come from God, and these gifts are operational in the life of the Christian as he or she participates in the sacraments and in good

works. The *Confutatio Pontificia* states that “it is entirely contrary to holy Scripture to deny that our works are meritorious” (4). In Article 6 of the same document, the authors state that the “truth of the Gospel [is that] works are not excluded.” And in Article 20 the question is asked, “If works were not meritorious why would the wise man say: ‘God will render a reward of the labors of his saints?’” Finally, in chapter 16 of the “Decree of Justification” it says that the justified have “by those very works which have been done in God, fully satisfied the divine law according to the state of this life, and to have truly merited eternal life.”

Act or process?

Thus, it is clear that Catholics and Lutherans came at the question of justification from different perspectives.

When sixteenth-century Catholic Christians said that good works were meritorious, they understood that good works by themselves *without divine grace* were worthless. Again, the *Confutatio Pontificia*:

“The condemnation of the Pelagians, who thought that man can merit eternal life by his own powers without the grace of God, is accepted as Catholic and in accordance with the ancient councils” (4).

“The merits that men acquire” come “by the assistance of divine grace” (4).

“All Catholics confess that our works of themselves have no merit, but that God’s grace makes them worthy of eternal life” (4).

“[The] word of Christ . . . teaches that our works bring no profit to God; that no one can be puffed up by our works; that when contrasted with the divine reward, our works are of no account and nothing” (6).

“Concerning good works, . . . they do not merit the remission of sin” (20).

“We know that our works are nothing and of no merit unless by virtue of Christ’s passion” (20).

The Catholics stated unequivocally that their faith was in Jesus Christ, His passion and His merits. The *Council of Trent* asserts that Christians are to have

“faith in his blood” (2) and in the “merit of His passion” (3). However, faith is just the “beginning of human salvation, the foundation and the root of all justification” (8).⁶ Faith in Christ and His passion did not fully justify a believer, because justification was an ongoing process. For the Catholics “faith cooperating with good works increase in that justice which they have received through the grace of Christ,

Therefore,
although both Lutheran and
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Christ,” “justification,”
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the part they played in the
believer being justified, were
quite different.⁷

and are still further justified” (10). Justification is not the “remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man” (7).

Thus, while Lutherans saw good works and growth in holiness as *following* the act of justification, Catholics saw good works and growth in holiness as part of justification. The Lutheran position, spelled out in the *Smalcald Articles*, states that “forgiveness of sins is followed by good works . . . [and] we say, besides,

that if good works do not follow, faith is false and not true” (3.13). However, the Catholics believed that not only were good works a part of justification, these good works increased the justification, which the believer already possessed. The *Council of Trent* said that “faith cooperating with good works increase in that justice which they have received through the grace of Christ, and are still further justified” (10).

This position allowed the Catholics to speak of being “made” righteous, while the Lutherans spoke of being “declared” righteous. In the *Formula of Concord* Lutherans placed their finger on this critical difference when they said that Catholics teach that believers are “being made righteous before God, because of the love infused by the Holy Ghost, virtues, and the works following them” and that “believers are justified before God and saved jointly by the imputed righteousness of Christ and by the new obedience begun in them” (15, 21). The Catholics in fact did teach that justification was not just something that happened to them, but it’s also something that happened inside them. To them justification was imputed and imparted. The *Council of Trent* speaks of justification as being the “renewal of the inward man” (7) and of Christ “infus[ing] his virtue into the said justified” (16). Canon 11 says that those who say that people are justified “by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ . . . to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth into their hearts” are anathema.

Therefore, although both Lutheran and Catholic Christians in the sixteenth century used words and phrases like “righteousness,” “justification,” “faith in Jesus Christ,” “good works,” and “grace,” how they understood these words, and the part they played in the believer being justified, were quite different.⁷

Shifts evidenced in the Joint Declaration

The Lutheran and Catholic Christians that signed the *Joint Declaration* in Augsburg in 1999 also employed

these words in their attempt to find common ground on the doctrine of justification. In order to accomplish togetherness, both sides needed to move toward the position of the other. And a review of the language of the “common confessions” of the *Joint Declaration* illustrate this shift by both.

The Lutheran teachings on justification in the sixteenth century have nothing to say about the work of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that they did not recognize the work of the Holy Spirit, but the teachings on the act of justification focused on the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. Justification was an act of God through Christ for humanity. However, two of the confessions of the *Joint Declaration* reveal their willingness to include the work of the Holy Spirit in the work of justification. Paragraph 15 states, “In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God.” The sixteenth-century Lutherans would not have denied this, but because the work the Holy Spirit was commonly thought of as an ongoing work in us, rather than an act of God through Jesus Christ for us, it would not have occurred to them to use this language.

Also, paragraph 28 of the *Joint Declaration* reads: “We confess together that in baptism the Holy Spirit unites one with Christ, justifies and truly renews the person.” While sixteenth-century Lutherans would confess that the Holy Spirit brings people to Jesus Christ and brings spiritual renewal, the antecedent for the word “justifies” in this sentence is the “Holy Spirit.” The teachings of the Lutherans in the sixteenth century made it abundantly clear that it was the perfect obedience and the propitiatory death of Jesus Christ that made justification possible and available. There is no indication in their teachings that the Holy Spirit justifies.

Finally, the words “impute,” (with one exception in paragraph 22) “declare,” and “by faith alone” are missing from the *Joint Declaration*. The Lutheran teachings on justification in the sixteenth century were full of references to God “declaring us righteous” and God “im-

puting His righteousness” to us “by faith alone.”

On the Catholic side, sixteenth-century Catholics were quite clear that justification was not just the forgiveness of sins, but included growth in holy living, which included good works. They also insisted that good works of themselves were not meritorious, but done in grace (or in God) they had meritorious value and were part of the process of justification. However, paragraph 37 of the *Joint Declaration* reads, “We confess together that good works—a Christian life lived in faith, hope, and love—follow justification and are its fruits.” This comes very close to the language and position taken by the Lutherans in the *Smalkald Articles*. While Catholics have not made this kind of shift in other significant areas, this repositioning is admirable.

An admirable and significant effort has been made in the *Joint Declaration* to heal a long-time open wound. Differences on the teaching of justification between these two communities of faith remain. These differences may never be resolved. But the two parties are “committed to continued and deepened

study of the biblical foundations of the doctrine of justification and to make it bear fruit in the life and teaching of the churches” (43).

Perhaps other Christians who continue to silently observe the differences from both sides of a long-standing Berlin-like wall of separation can look at this attempt by two long-time opponents and make the attempt to speak with one another, rather than to shout. ■

¹ For the full text of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, see <<http://www.elca.org/ea/jddj/>>

² cf. Also paragraphs 13 and 41.

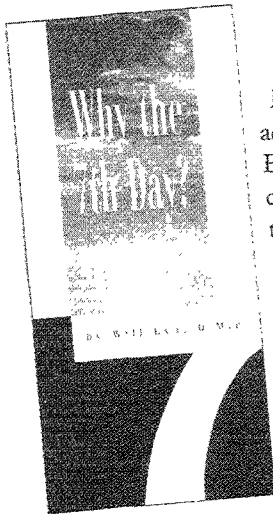
³ *Council of Trent*, 9. The Decree on Justification can be found at <<http://history.hanover.edu/early/trent.ct06d1.htm>> The Canons on Justification can be found at <<http://history.hanover.edu/early/trent/ct06jc.htm>>

⁴ The Table Talk on justification is located at <http://www.ccel.org/l/luther/table_talk/table_talk14.htm>

⁵ *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, 4. Text for this document is located at <<http://www.ctsfw.edu/etext/boc/ap/>>

⁶ *Joint Declaration*, chapter 8. This language of the “root” of justification is found in the *JD* 1.10, where it says, “In Christ’s death and resurrection all dimensions of his saving work have their roots.”

⁷ Both the Lutherans and Catholics claimed to have the support of Scripture and tradition, but the texts each chose were ones which they felt supported their position. However, very little exegesis is done in these documents.



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THE APOCALYPSE:

Pathological neurosis or healing therapy?

Recent reinvestigation into the Branch Davidian tragedy of 1993 in Waco, Texas, has something to say to Christians.



Paul Fisher is a pastor in the Southern New England Conference.

According to Professor James Tabor, one factor in the disaster was the failure of the U.S. federal agencies to comprehend and take seriously the apocalyptic beliefs of the Davidians.¹ Aberrant and extreme as the Davidian beliefs were, this failure on the part of the government is part of a larger cultural failure to come to grips with the power of the Apocalypse.

The Apocalypse is a dynamic and, as history shows, a dangerous revolutionary document. Unfortunately, the misguided radical use of the Apocalypse by extreme groups often provides an easy target for those who wish to minimize its biblical and historical value.

The book of Revelation has long been marginalized within the Christian church. Although it is part of the canonical text of Scripture, it has been viewed since the time of Augustine as something of an embarrassment to the

faith with its assertion of the imminent second coming of Jesus Christ. The trend has been to allegorize and spiritualize the Apocalypse in order to render its message more palatable to a contemporary Christianity.

In more recent times, the Apocalypse has been subjected to the probing critical enquiry of the therapist. It has taken its place on the couch in our therapy-oriented culture. Beginning with Sigmund Freud, with his classic case study of Daniel Paul Schreber, the apocalyptic idea of the end of history has become associated with schizophrenia.² According to classic psychoanalytic interpretation, the doctrine of the end of the world is simply the projection of interpersonal chaos and confusion onto the external world. The Apocalypse is diagnosed as little more than a personal crisis projected by the imagination onto a screen of global and cosmic propor-

PAUL FISHER

tions. Such criticism has done much to undermine confidence in the prophetic and apocalyptic portions of the Bible during the last century.

It is hard to imagine a better strategy to marginalize the Word of God in a therapeutic culture than to equate truth with pathology. In much of the therapeutic world, those who uphold apocalyptic truth are not merely seen to be intellectually mistaken, they are pathologically ill. It would be bad enough if this form of criticism came only from humanistic, secular therapists. Unfortunately, the pathologization of apocalyptic truth has struck a resonant chord in certain sectors of the Christian intellectual community.

One popular scholarly study claims that the Apocalypse is the literary expression of first-century Christians' feelings of "resentment" and "envy" toward their rich and prosperous Roman neighbors.³ So much for the vivid visionary truth about the justice of God against the oppressor in the Apocalypse. So much for the canonical book of Revelation as a text gleaming with transcendent redemptive meaning for the oppressed people of God. Such a psychological-critical reading seems to align itself with the oppressor. It continues to stigmatize and marginalize the oppressed apocalyptic community just as surely as did Rome in the prime of its power, when Revelation was written to encourage the small flocks of Christians throughout her borders.

The recent trend to view martyrdom as a form of masochism⁴ is another example of the pathologization of apocalyptic truth. On the couch of the therapist, those who courageously "loved not their lives unto death" are transformed into sick souls with deep dysfunctions.

Examples of this pathologization of apocalyptic truth could be multiplied. But it is enough to notice the trend.

Revelation, a book of healing

How can the church in general and the pastor in particular respond to this psychotherapeutic challenge to the Apocalypse? Is it possible that the apoca-

lyptic patient is not in as bad a condition as has been diagnosed? Could it be that the pathology is in the critic and not in the one on the couch? Is it possible to convince our culture that the Apocalypse is not a marginal and substandard way of thinking but instead is a fundamen-

The message of the Apocalypse is as important for the church today as it ever has been. Because this message is often perceived as marginal and even dangerous and because, in the hands of irresponsible practitioners, the pathologization of apocalyptic truth is a reality, pastors must be prepared to recognize and meet such challenges. This is a reality that we must resist with all the moral and intellectual power that God has given us.

tally Christian and noble expression? Could it be true that the apocalyptic worldview is actually an indication of spiritual health as opposed to a sign of psychological dysfunction? I would suggest that this is an essential part of the constructive and evangelistic task of the Christian and Adventist pastor in the

current intellectual and cultural climate. We must persuade our Freudian-resonant culture that the final book of the Bible embodies a healthy way of thinking and feeling.

The message of the book of Revelation does not make its hearers sick. It is a divine source of healing for human pathology of all kinds. It presents to our view a "tree" whose "leaves" are "for the healing (*therapeia*) of the nations" (Rev. 22:2). It not only bears witness to the existence of a divine source of healing but also actually mediates the blessings of that tree to those who "hear" and "read" and "keep" its message (1:3). Such hearers, and only such hearers, will not participate in violent revolutions or doubtful moral actions but will instead exhibit the "patience of the saints" in the form of a "consistent resistance" to what is evil and destructive (14:12). The mind that is fortified with apocalyptic truth is intellectually and morally equipped to discern error and to resist the forces of injustice that threaten to rend the social and personal fabric of our lives.

The heart of the message of the Apocalypse is the conquest of evil by the redeeming power of God. "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death" (12:11). The Lamb is the apocalyptic symbol of the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Thus, for apocalyptic believers, love that manifests itself in self-sacrifice is understood to be the absolute bedrock of the moral government of God's universe. If that message is pathological, then the whole of Scripture must be subject to the same diagnosis. But most people instinctively sense that such love is not pathological at all but is intensely therapeutic and beneficial. Pastors must become adept at playing this loving chord of the Apocalypse for all it is worth.

The damage is done when people create speculative and imaginative angles on some of the Apocalyptic symbols and disproportionately or excessively emphasize these while excluding the paramount symbol of the Lamb. This tilts the truth and thrusts those involved into a detri-

mental view and use of the book of Revelation.

With this in mind, as we preach the Apocalypse we must recognize and insist that pathology is not in the Apocalypse itself but is rather in the mind of the one who reads or misreads the Apocalypse. Psychologist and biblical interpreter Cedric Johnson says that "biblical data are sometimes distorted through the spectacles of our personality."⁵ He mentions a number of ways in which the human mind may corrupt a healthy understanding of the Word of God.⁶ I will focus briefly on three that are particularly relevant to the misinterpretation of the apocalyptic message of Revelation: reaction formation, selective attention, and transference.

Misinterpretation of Revelation

Reaction formation is essentially a defense mechanism against anxiety. For example, the strong preaching of a particular preacher against sexual sin may appear in retrospect to be a fear-reaction against his own sexual impulses. Isn't it true that our antennae are often raised by those whom we perceive to "protest too loudly"? Another example of reaction formation might be the professor who raises the volume of his voice as a substitute for the self-perceived weakness of his argument. What psychological factors might lead to the strong reaction of our culture against the apocalyptic truth of Scripture? Is it possible that the long-lived desire to negate the message of the Apocalypse is in reality a way to minimize our personal and societal fears of the end of the world? Is it possible that even apocalyptic believers do not study the prophecies because they are reacting to the anxieties and fears that such subjects might evoke in them? Such tendencies may well lead to a misinterpretation or depreciation of a book of the Bible such as the book of Revelation.

Selective attention is the simple human ability to screen information. For example, when my sister was a child, mom took her to the doctor because of a hearing problem. After checking her, the doctor said, "Her ears are fine; she seems to hear only what she wants to." As I re-

call, the diagnosis was essentially the cure! A similar phenomenon is noted by Ariel Roth who draws attention to the mechanism of "intellectual phase locking" by which scientists often overlook (or stop looking for) evidence that would counter a favored hypothesis.⁷

This capacity for selective attention and "intellectual phase locking" could lead to an unbalanced and potentially harmful view of the symbolism of the Apocalypse. For example, a preoccupation with the apocalyptic images of evil (beasts, dragons, false prophets) might lead to a fortress mentality that would hinder loving social contact. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, "The complete fulfillment of its mission will always be gravely endangered if the congregation supposes itself too directly to be placed in the situation of Revelation 13."⁸ To read prematurely present experience in the light of eschatological conflict could lead to the withdrawal and isolation of the believing community from a world that desperately needs the salt of Christian grace.

Transference happens when, based on past feelings and experiences, a person reacts to a current situation or individual. For example, a member of the church may transfer their hostile feelings toward a parent onto the pastor in the counseling process. Or a person may react negatively to the pastor as an authority-figure based entirely on previous negative experiences with encountered authority-figures.

Is it possible for the same kind of transference dynamic to be present and operative in the mind of a person as they come to Scripture? For example, most of us probably are not completely comfortable with the apocalyptic depictions of judgment found in Revelation. It seems that this discomfort could be, to a large degree, based upon our past exposure to human judgment and justice in our present life and culture. Our immediate society may be full of expressions of opposition to the death penalty, for example. So when we read the visionary accounts of God's judgment against the wicked in the Apocalypse, we automatically transfer our feelings and reactions

against judgment and justice in our present to the Apocalyptic scene. Then, rather than rejoicing in God's justice against evil we transfer our feelings of aversion to the unjust situations about us to the way God is described as handling judgment in the book of Revelation. This helps to explain why oppressed peoples, who have experienced real in-your-face evil, do not seem to be as troubled by apocalyptic justice as others who have not had such experience.⁹

Conclusion

The message of the Apocalypse is as important for the church today as it ever has been. Because this message is often perceived as marginal and even dangerous and because, in the hands of irresponsible practitioners, the pathologization of apocalyptic truth is a reality, pastors must be prepared to recognize and meet such challenges. This is a reality that we must resist with all the moral and intellectual power that God has given us.

As preachers of the Apocalypse, we need to regularly and systematically unpack its "healing" message for our listeners. As pastors, we must regularly and systematically apply its wisdom to the anxieties of those who come to us for counsel. Although viewed from the couch of the psychotherapist the Apocalypse might appear dangerous and disturbing, from the pulpit the message of the book of Revelation should shine forth in all its transcendent therapeutic glory! ■

¹ James Tabor is professor in the Religious Studies Department at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. He was involved in negotiations with David Koresh to surrender to the FBI. For a complete statement of his view of the Waco crisis available on the World Wide Web: ccat.sas.upenn.edu/00/Archive/Religion/Koresh/Koresh%20Perspective

² Ulrich H. J. Kortner, *The End of the World: A Theological Interpretation*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 47.

³ Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 144.

⁴ David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 38 (1984), 42.

⁵ Cedric B. Johnson, *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-66.

⁷ Ariel Roth, *Origins: Linking Science and Scripture* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1998), 294.

⁸ Kortner, 226.

⁹ Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987).



Are you ready to die?" When my colleague and long-time friend, Harold Baasch, confronted me with this question,

I initially thought he was enquiring about my salvation.

My response was quick and blessedly happy, "I love the Lord and I know He loves me. Yes, I think I'm ready to die. But I wouldn't choose this afternoon."

"No," Harold insisted, "are you really prepared to die? Do you have your affairs in order if you were to die?" Then he began to share the pain of his brother-in-law's recent death and the importance of having our personal, business, and family arrangements made in such a manner that any of us could be ready to die. Spirituality may be the most important preparation for death, but other concerns are absolutely necessary as well.

During those difficult days and in the weeks to follow, Harold has encouraged a number of individuals to check the status of various issues because none of us know when we will die. Here are some of the issues that he has raised and their importance for us as ministers and for those whom we pastor.

Planning today does not hasten your death. If you make appropriate plans for the future well-being of your family when you are no longer present, your death will not come more quickly.

Avoiding planning does not demonstrate faith. Some people mistakenly believe they are acting in faith when they refuse to consider the future and "just leave everything in God's hands." This is neither God's will nor God's way. The first rule of heaven is order, and our Lord expects us to follow His own example in planning.

Ready to die?

JAMES A. CRESS

Every person already has a will. If you think you do not have a will, please understand that you nevertheless have one. The government has made it for you, and your property, finances, children, and estate will be handled according to the wishes of the legal system regardless of your undocumented intentions.

Your children need you to provide for their security. It is your responsibility as parents to select appropriate care-givers for your children should tragedy leave them orphans. Otherwise, the courts will designate their guardians. When you consider who to choose as guardians for your children, consider someone who will be of appropriate health and age (perhaps not your own parents) to undertake the responsibility of raising children. Select believers who hold similar values and who either have sufficient resources or to whom you will provide resources through your will. Request permission of prospective guardian designees and consider their current proximity to your family in order for them to become acquainted with your children now.

Provide for your own medical choices. Both you and your spouse should provide a power of attorney to the other, which specifies your personal intentions should a medical emergency occur. Some individuals do not want extraordinary, heroic measures taken to prolong life in case of tragedy while others may desire every life-extending procedure possible. Physicians will have no legal authority to carry out your wishes unless you provide that through a medical power of attorney, which allows your spouse to make those

decisions if you are incapacitated. A "living will" can also determine the quality and extent of care that you will receive and can specifically instruct what you wish to happen should death come.

Lead by example. Responsible pastoral leadership will encourage every church member toward appropriate planning. You cannot expect your members to make better decisions than you personally make. You will speak with much more credibility and persuasiveness if you outline the steps you have taken to plan for your own family's future.

Select competent assistance. Request guidance from trust services leaders in your union or conference or select competent legal counsel to prepare the documents necessary to assure that your instructions will be fulfilled. Also, consider how your estate may bless God's work and hasten Christ's coming.

Plan today as if you will live forever. Include appropriate retirement and savings plans as if you will live to a ripe old age and will need to secure your security as you age. Remember that insurance is not the risky, unregulated business that it previously was when wise counsel directed avoidance of it.

Live today as if your life could end at any moment. I'm constantly amazed at those who project dates or speculate about the timing of Christ's return, but ignore the reality that our lives could tragically conclude in a moment. Remember William Miller's commitment after the Great Disappointment, "Today, and today, and today."

Submit your life afresh to your Saviour each day, asking His will to be done in and through your life and family. Then, to answer that essential query from my friend, Harold, you will be ready to die.

More importantly, you will be prepared to live! ■

B O O K R E V I E W

Effective Church Growth Strategies, by Gene Getz and Joe Wall. Dallas: Word Books, 2000.

Hardcover, 262 pages. US\$21.99.

The book attempts to answer some basic questions regarding the Church in our times: Why do we exist as a Church? How should we function in a changing culture? How do we differentiate between absolutes and non-absolutes?

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As a pastor, I appreciated their emphasis on wise planning and thoughtful strategizing without sacrificing or neglecting the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. Our dependence must be on the Holy Spirit *while laying plans*, yet submitting them to His leading.—Bonita J. Shields, associate pastor, Spencerville Seventh-day Adventist Church, Silver Spring, Maryland.

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Online SDA forums

As you may be aware, the CompuServe and Internet SDA forums closed on June 15, 2000. But there are alternatives. "Volunteer Online Adventist forum" (<www.Online-adventist.org>) was the first one to come online and is designed like the Internet Adventist forum and has the freest discussion groups, as long as one is courteous, that is.

The second site is a little different with some different discussion fields added: <www.Clubadventist.com>. —Bruce Nelson, via email.

Cultural diversity day

One of our favorite holiday season services is when we schedule Christmas Around the World. We invite several different cultures represented in the church membership to prepare a "show and tell," ten-minute segment of a Christmas custom from their native homeland.

They also dress in native costume and read the nativity story in their native language. Special seasonal songs are sung as well. The congregation sings appropriate carols

interspersed between family presentations. Often we fear what we do not understand. The purpose of this service is to explain how and why certain traditions exist. It also makes people from all backgrounds feel loved and accepted.

The service ends with a rich, warm feeling of unity since all have come together for the same purpose—to worship the Christ of Christmas.—Douglas R. Rose, pastor, Grand Prairie, Texas.

The Sabbath School teacher: How to make your class grow

Your Sabbath School class is an important part of your local church body. Most churches experience growth through an effective Sabbath School program. Why? Because Sabbath School meets an important spiritual, mental, emotional, and social need in a direct way. But just having a Sabbath School program isn't enough. It is important to understand ways in which the program can contribute to church growth.

Perhaps the most basic way to achieve church growth is through the growth of the classes themselves. This growth can take place in two ways: numerically and spiritually. Let's explore some ways your class can grow in number and in spiritual maturity.

Numerical growth:

1. Through visitation. Follow up on visitors or prospects with a personal visit. Oftentimes, visitors are forgotten after they leave. A personal visit will make a great impression on the visitor (prospect).

If you do not regularly have visitors, invite your unit (class) members to write names of people they know who may be prospects. Encourage unit members to secure the prospects' names and addresses or phone numbers. Follow these with a phone contact and personal visit.

2. Through student contacts.

Although your contact is important, nothing can be more meaningful than for a prospect to receive an invitation from a friend. Encourage your class members to invite their friends and acquaintances to Sabbath School. One way to do this is to write notes or letters of invitation and enclose a copy of the Sabbath School lesson study booklet as a love gift.

3. Through transportation arrangements. If you come across prospects who have no means of getting to Sabbath School, check with your Sabbath School superintendent about possible arrangements. It may mean expending a little of your own effort to see that those prospects have a ride to Sabbath School. You can be sure, however, that the effort will be worthwhile.

Spiritual growth:

1. Through personal prayer and commitment. The spiritual level of a church cannot rise any higher than that of its pastor. Perhaps the same could apply to the Sabbath School class-teacher, for you are, in effect, the "pastor" of a mini-congregation within the church. Consider how much time you presently spend in personal devotion to God. Are Bible study and prayer daily practices in your life? Are you striving to grow spiritually? These are extremely important questions that directly affect not only your spiritual growth but the growth of your class as well. Spiritual growth and maturity enable you to teach under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. His presence makes the difference between the true ministry and just going through the motions week after week.

2. Through earnest prayer for your class. Don't let a week pass without spending time in prayer for your class. Name your students individually as you pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand their spiritual needs and minister in a way

that will help meet those needs.

3. Through discipling. Our highest goal as Christians is to become like the Master, Jesus Christ. Helping students (action unit class) grow and mature spiritually is a major aim of Christian education. Therefore, it is important to help your students both understand what it means to

follow Christ and then take the necessary steps toward that goal.

Consider these principles prayerfully and apply them to your class. You will help build and strengthen your class and the lives of the students to whom you minister. —Isaac Sarfo, pastor, Wiamosai, Ashanti, Ghana, West Africa. ■

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