

# The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: A Curtain on the Reformation?

Leonardo De Chirico of the [Reformanda Initiative](#) interviews Prof. Michael Reeves, President and Professor of Theology at Union School of Theology, UK. Author of books such as *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation* (2010) and (with Tim Chester), *Why The Reformation Still Matters* (2016).

On October 31, 1999, the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation signed 'The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification' (JDDJ), claiming that they were 'now able to articulate a common understanding of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ.'<sup>[1]</sup> This has led many since to think that the fundamental theological differences of the Reformation have now been resolved, and that there remains little or nothing of real theological substance to prevent evangelical-Catholic unity. Professor Mark Noll, for instance, boldly declared,

If it is true, as once was repeated frequently by Protestants conscious of their anchorage in Martin Luther or John Calvin that *iustificatio articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* (justification is the article on which the church stands or falls), then the Reformation is over.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Let's start here: what should we make of the JDDJ?

The JDDJ itself was rather less sanguine about what had been achieved, and stated explicitly that it 'does not cover all that either church teaches about justification.'<sup>[3]</sup> Nevertheless, it did claim to be a 'decisive step forward on the way to overcoming the division of the church' in that it managed to express 'a consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.'<sup>[4]</sup> This itself, though, was a considerable claim. Those 'doctrinal condemnations' it professed to avoid include the binding anathemas of the Council of Trent (1545-63), such as:

CANON IX.-If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.

CANON XI.-If any one saith, that men are justified, either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or

even that the grace, whereby we are justified, is only the favour of God; let him be anathema.

CANON XII.-If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified; let him be anathema.

CANON XXIV.-If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema.[5]

## Is this a failure of the JDDJ?

Since the JDDJ expressly sought to avoid those condemnations, its understanding of justification cannot be that sinners are saved by faith alone without works by the sole remission of sins and the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ.[6] It cannot then amount to the evangelical understanding of justification that the Council of Trent sought so carefully to define and oppose. And since it does not encompass the evangelical understanding of justification, it cannot be a decisive step forward to overcoming the theological differences between evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church.

## How does the JDDJ define justification then?

When it first sets out to define the biblical message of justification, various aspects of salvation are listed alongside each other.

In the New Testament diverse treatments of "righteousness" and "justification" are found in the writings of Matthew (5:10; 6:33; 21:32), John (16:8-11), Hebrews (5:3; 10:37f), and James (2:14-26).[10] In Paul's letters also, the gift of salvation is described in various ways, among others: "for freedom Christ has set us free" (*Gal* 5:1-13; cf. *Rom* 6:7), "reconciled to God" (2 *Cor* 5:18-21; cf. *Rom* 5:11), "peace with God" (*Rom* 5:1), "new creation" (2 *Cor* 5:17), "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (*Rom* 6:11,23), or "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (cf. 1 *Cor* 1:2; 1:30; 2 *Cor* 1:1). Chief among these is the "justification" of sinful human beings by God's grace through faith (*Rom* 3:23-25), which came into particular prominence in the Reformation period.[7]

In evangelical theology, all these diverse aspects of salvation are important. But they are not to be *confused*. Particularly, the believer's progressive transformation into the likeness of Christ is not to be confused with – or taken to be the cause of – his or her justification. Yet in that paragraph, it is not at all clear whether different aspects of salvation are being listed *alongside and including* justification (the traditional evangelical view), or whether they are being seen as *facets of* justification (the traditional Roman Catholic view). And the possibility of two substantially – even radically – different interpretations of that paragraph is never mentioned.

A couple of paragraphs later it becomes clear that the traditional Roman Catholic interpretation has, in fact, been assumed. Justification is defined as follows:

Justification is the forgiveness of sins (cf. *Rom* 3:23-25; *Acts* 13:39; *Lk* 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (*Rom* 5:12-21) and from the curse of the law

(Gal 3:10-14). ... It occurs in the reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism and incorporation into the one body (Rom 8:1f, 9f; I Cor 12:12f).<sup>[8]</sup>

## So what is at stake here?

Quite clearly, justification is here said to *include* the process of inner transformation, and *not include* the imputation of Christ's righteousness. But that is an understanding of justification quite different to that we have seen so ably opposed by the Council of Trent. Any theology that makes the believer's inner transformation a constituent part (instead of a consequence) of justification is at odds with the material principle of the Reformation (justification by faith alone).

## Yet the wording of the JDDJ is so careful that for large chunks of text it can be hard to imagine it being open to two possible but incompatible theological interpretations.

Yes, take paragraph 12: 'The justified live by faith that comes from the Word of Christ ( Rom 10:17) and is active through love.' What Christian could object? But does that love *contribute to* the believer's righteousness before God (the traditional Roman Catholic view), or does it *follow from* it (the traditional evangelical view)? We are not told.

Or take paragraph 15, which appears to affirm a Reformation distinctive (grace alone):

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.

Yet what could be taken for an affirmation of *justification* by grace alone is in fact only a statement that by his grace alone God renews our hearts, transforming us to do good works. It does not answer the question of whether those good works and that renewal play a part in the justification of the believer. Only a couple of paragraphs later does it become more obvious that the JDDJ assumes that they do. Our new life is due, it explains, 'to the forgiving and *renewing* mercy that God *imparts* as a gift.'<sup>[9]</sup> Instead of describing the gratuitous *imputation* of Christ's righteousness, the language used is of the *impartation* of a *renewing* mercy. But that is not the evangelical view of justification first articulated by Martin Luther and so clearly recognized and denounced by Trent.

## Particularly attractive to evangelicals is the statement in paragraph 25 that 'whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it.' What does this statement mean?

Two paragraphs later this striking announcement is explained as meaning nothing more than that 'this *renewal* in faith, hope, and love is always dependent on God's unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification *about which one could boast before God*.'<sup>[10]</sup> That is, God's grace is the foundation of our *internal renewal*, meaning that we could not boast before God because of it. But again, that is not at all the same thing as God, out of his grace alone, imputing the righteousness of Christ to the believer.

## Why does the JDDJ fail to deliver what it promises?

The essential problem with the Declaration is a consequence of its positive intent. The aim of the JDDJ is to find commonalities, not differences. But with that comes a lopsided methodology that obscures those differences. It means, for example, that while it will emphasise the agreed truth that faith and love are not to be separated in salvation, it fails to give any equal weight to explaining how differently evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church would distinguish the roles of faith and love in salvation. So paragraph 22 argues that faith and love 'are not to be separated.' Absolutely, but that leaves a pastorally vital question unresolved: do my works of love contribute to my righteousness before God, or is my righteousness an 'alien,' 'passive' righteousness – the righteousness of Christ imputed to me?

Similarly, we read in the JDDJ how Lutherans 'emphasize that righteousness as acceptance by God and sharing in the righteousness of Christ is always complete. *At the same time, they state that there can be growth in its effects in Christian living.*'<sup>[11]</sup>

Of course that is entirely true, but in the context it is misleading. For while Lutherans and other evangelicals *do* believe that there can be growth in the effects of grace and justification on a believer's life, they *do not* believe that those effects can justify. We are clearly meant to see a commonality, but there is no evidence here that the two radically different theologies of justification have actually come closer together.

## Why does it matter?

Parsing the details of how evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church understand justification could give the impression that the differences are too refined to be significant. It certainly feels more positive and less mentally taxing simply to say they look pretty similar. But when each theology is practically applied to real lives it becomes clear how deep the differences go.

## Let's see an example...

Take the question of assurance of salvation, which drove Luther on his quest and which the JDDJ addresses in section 4.6. According to paragraph 36,

No one may doubt God's mercy and Christ's merit. Every person, however, may be concerned about his salvation when he looks upon his own weaknesses and shortcomings. Recognizing his own failures, however, the believer may yet be certain that God intends his salvation.

At first sight this is rather confusing: can a believer have assurance or not? The second sentence sounds thoroughly Roman, making us concerned when we see our failings. The third appears more evangelical, offering certainty of salvation for the believer. The Declaration's own explanatory sources explain: 'a person can certainly lose or renounce faith, and self-commitment to God and his word of promise. But if he believes in this sense, he *cannot at the same time* believe that God is unreliable in his word of promise.'<sup>[12]</sup> In other words, God *is* faithful to save, but only to save those who maintain their 'self-commitment to God and his word of promise.'

**So, it seems that the assurance of believers thus rests on their own self-commitment.**

That fits nicely with the theology of the Roman Catholic Church, but not with how Luther himself expressed it. The believer, he wrote, can have absolute assurance that

Her sins cannot now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own and which she can confidently display alongside her sins in the face of death and hell and say, "If I have sinned, yet my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is mine and all mine is his," as the bride in the Song of Solomon [2:16] says, "My beloved is mine and I am his."<sup>[13]</sup>

Looking with ultimate concern on personal shortcomings, or confidently saying 'all his is mine and all mine is his:' those are the two applications that reveal two quite different theologies.

## Wrapping up this interview, what can we say in conclusion?

The JDDJ claimed to have formulated a new consensus position that managed to avoid both the condemnations of the Council of Trent on evangelical theology, and those of the Lutheran Confessions on Roman Catholic theology. Yet when the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity made an official response to the Declaration on behalf of the Church, they felt the need to make some important clarifications. 'The Catholic Church,' stated the Response, 'cannot yet speak of a consensus such as would eliminate every difference between Catholics and Lutherans in the understanding of justification.'<sup>[14]</sup> Indeed, some of 'these differences concern aspects of substance' so significant they must 'be overcome before we can affirm, as is done generically in n.41, that these points no longer incur the condemnations of the Council of Trent.'<sup>[15]</sup>

## What does it refer to in particular?

In particular, the Response made it clear that evangelical language describing believers being at the same time righteous and sinner is unacceptable to the Roman Catholic Church. It

remains difficult to see how, in the current state of the presentation, given in the Joint Declaration, we can say that this doctrine on "*simul iustus et peccator*" is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decree on original sin and justification.<sup>[16]</sup>

It also recognized some of the lopsidedness and ambiguity of the JDDJ in how it constantly sought to find and affirm commonalities. This meant, for example, that where the Declaration had affirmed that the good works of the justified are always the fruit of grace, it had failed to clarify how the Roman Catholic Church maintains that they are also the fruit of man. 'We can therefore say that eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits.'<sup>[17]</sup>

## That is, the Roman Catholic Church still repudiates the material principle of the Reformation (justification by faith alone)...

It must do, for its very understanding of justification remains materially different. Where evangelicalism views justification as a divine declarative act whereby God pronounces the sinner righteous in Christ, Rome still sees justification as an ongoing, transformative and cooperative process. For that reason, the Response also stated that further discussions with Lutherans and evangelicals would need to consider the sacrament of penance, by which – according to the

Council of Trent – the sinner can be ‘justified anew (*rursus iustificari*).’<sup>[18]</sup> With such reference to ‘re-justification,’ the Response could not be clearer that, for all attempts to find wording that fits both Roman Catholic and evangelical views of justification, there remains a material and momentous difference between them.

## All that being the case, it is wishful thinking to imagine that the JDDJ has proven anything like an end to the important theological differences between evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church...

The matter of the Reformation was not accurately addressed there, and still stands: are believers justified through faith in Christ *alone*, or is eternal life ‘at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works and merits’?

## Endnotes

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[1] JDDJ ([http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_c\\_luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_c_luth-joint-declaration_en.html)), para. 5.

[2] Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism*, Grand Rapids, IL: Baker, 2005, 232.

[3] JDDJ, para. 5.

[4] *Ibid.*, paras. 44, 5.

[5] *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), 45-47.

[6] The JDDJ expressly affirms, ‘The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent’ (para. 41).

[7] *Ibid.*, para. 9.

[8] *Ibid.*, para. 11.

[9] *Ibid.*, para. 17, my emphasis.

[10] *Ibid.*, para. 27, my emphasis.

[11] *Ibid.*, para. 39, my emphasis.

[12] JDDJ Appendix Resources for 4.6, from *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do*

*They Still Divide?* Ed., Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 56, original emphasis.

<sup>[13]</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 352.

[14] 'Response of the Catholic Church to the Joint Declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on the Doctrine of Justification,' Declaration, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_danswer-catholic\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_danswer-catholic_en.html)

[15] Response, Clarification 5.

[16] Ibid., Clarification 1.

[17] Ibid., Clarification 3.

[18] Ibid., Clarification 4.



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