

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Roman Catholic Church and the Worldwide Lutheran Federation

Introduction: While this declaration accomplished much in terms of ending adversity between religions and finding common ground, I have to agree with the critique offered by the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, that the declaration failed to clarify “whether justification is ‘forensic’ or ‘transformational.’”

Common Ground: Based on my “folk-Catholic” upbringing, I was surprised at how much common ground was found in this declaration. Both sides agreed on a definition of justification [par. 11], that justification is by faith in grace and not by works [pars. 25, 31], that justification means sin is no longer imputed to the believer [par. 22], and that justification should result in fruits [par. 37].

I am not sure all Evangelicals would agree with the definition of justification in this declaration. An Evangelical definition might be that justification is God’s declaration of an ungodly believer to be righteous in his sight because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to him [this is distinct from the sometime biblical usage to refer to recognition of righteous behavior]. While this certainly entails forgiveness of sins, it is not merely that, nor is it necessarily including the resulting liberation from sin’s power, communion with God, or unity with Christ, all of which was included in the definition of the declaration [par. 11]. The declaration states that justification “occurs in the reception of the Holy Spirit in Baptism and incorporation into the one body” [par. 11], but even assuming this refers to baptism of the Holy Spirit and not water baptism, this again confuses what Evangelicals refer to as two [or three] separate aspects of the integral salvation process.

More disturbing were statements that believers should seek daily for forgiveness and penance [par. 28], that believers are forgiven through Word and sacrament [par. 29], and that the Law was ever a way of salvation [par. 31]. With regard to this last item, Calvin also thought along these lines, but it seems to ignore the problems of imputed and inherited sin for the non-believer, such that even if never acting in sin he would still be condemned.

Roman Catholic Position: It is not only my “folk-Catholic” upbringing that is at odds with this declaration. According to this declaration, the Roman Catholic Church is comfortable with moving away from the Council of Trent’s insistence that one could never have assurance of justification, because assurance for them was based on a change in the believer, and works increased that justification. The Church also apparently is departing from its 1994 Catechism, which states that justification is the remission of sins plus ongoing sanctification and renewal of the inner person. Cardinal Cassidy criticized the declaration, saying eternal life is “grace and the reward given by God for good works and merit,” and that through the “sacrament of penance” a person can be “justified anew.”

Despite these departures from former Roman Catholic orthodoxy, there were several views which were still distinct from the Lutheran position in this declaration. The

Roman Catholics viewed justification as forgiveness, but said that forgiving grace always brings renewal of the person [par. 24]. While Evangelicals might agree that a result of salvation is renewal in a rebirth and in the resulting ongoing sanctification, many would balk at considering renewal a part of justification. The Roman Catholics also tied into justification the union with Christ [par. 27], which Evangelicals would not deny occurs in salvation, but would assert occurs as a part of salvation separate from justification. The Roman Catholics stated that justification takes away all that is sin in a person [par. 30] and so the person is “made” righteous [par. 27]. This makes their view of justifying grace sound intrinsic, which McGrath described as an inherent infusion of grace. The Roman Catholics stated that if a believer willfully sins, it is not sufficient even that he repent, but he must have a “Sacrament of Reconciliation.”

Lutheran Position: The Lutherans believe justification refers to Christ’s righteousness imputed to the believer, in a declaration of forgiveness, which leads to life renewal [par. 23]. The imputation of Christ’s righteousness is forensic, leaving the believer totally righteous before God [par. 29]. While justification leads to a renewal of life, that renewal is a result, not a part of justification itself [par. 26]. With these distinctions, Evangelicals can agree, even if they cannot agree with some of the other statements in the declaration.

Conclusions: I thought it was amusing that two Roman Catholic scholars characterized the differences between the Roman Catholic position and the Lutheran position as follows: Neuhaus said the Roman Catholic position was theological and analytical while the Lutheran was devotional and experiential; and Dulles said the Roman Catholic was scholastic while the Lutheran was existential and relational. Yet, it is the Lutheran position [in agreement with most Evangelicals, I would think] that holds justification is forensic and righteousness is imputed, while the Roman Catholic position is that justification is transformative and righteousness is effective or intrinsic [thus experiential or existential]!

Rather than trying to argue their way into a common definition of a theological term, perhaps the two sides would have better spent their time trying to argue to a common theological understanding of what Scripture teaches about righteousness. Philippians 3 shows a distinction between God’s declaration of imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer [“positional sanctification,” if you will] and the command to begin to live up to that righteousness in a process of ongoing sanctifying grace. While it is true that the believer experiences some transformation in the process of salvation, and while the imputation of Christ’s righteousness cannot be separated from that process of salvation, that imputation does not include the transformation, nor does the transformation include the imputation; rather, they are two distinct though integral parts of the salvation process.

The Protestant tradition of considering justification as a declaration of righteousness is correct over the Roman Catholic view of justification as an impartation of righteousness, but the point is not to argue over diction, but to understand imputed righteousness, which it appears some in the Roman Catholic camp still do not.