

The Common Statement on Justification between the Roman Catholics and the Lutheran Church of Australia

Earlier this year we commented three times on the dialogue sponsored by the Roman Catholics and the Lutheran World Federation about justification, called "*Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification*." Now the Roman Catholics and representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have issued their own "Common Statement" about justification. This "Common Statement" claims that there is "substantial agreement." It would be more accurate to say that the representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have betrayed the Scriptural doctrine.

The "Common Statement" is not based on the primary passages of the Bible that deal with justification through faith. Scripture has not fulfilled its proper role.

The Statement should have roundly rejected the Roman Catholic position that justifying faith is a virtue, alongside of love. It should have rejected the argument of straw, that confidence in Jesus Christ, which justifies before God, is "intellectual assent", and the Roman Catholic assertion that faith must produce works to justify (§ 9).

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should have rejected the Roman understanding of original sin as a wounding (§4), rather than as a total corruption of human nature. They should, because of the bondage of the human will in spiritual matters, have rejected the attempt to define faith as "free acceptance." They should have insisted that "concupiscence" (sinful desire) is itself sin, and rejected the Roman Catholic view that sinful desire is not itself sin but only an inclination to sin.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should have rejected the Roman position that an unregenerate person can contribute towards his coming to faith (§9), and the Roman Catholic view that human co-operation with justifying grace is part of grace. It should have rejected the Roman Catholic view that good works contribute to growth in grace (§8).

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have betrayed the position they should have defended, that justification is God's counting, reckoning, or imputing righteousness, by accepting the position that justification is both God's declaration and making righteous (§ 3, 5, 9). The Common Statement should have rejected the Roman Catholic view that it is through sanctification and renewal that an unjust person becomes just (§3).

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia have not rejected the position that justification includes human co-operation, sanctification, or inner renewal. This is both a logical blunder and a blatant mixing of Law and Gospel. Logically, if I water the garden, I can say that the watering produces flowers. However, it is absurd to say that the flowers are part of the watering. Theologically, the inclusion of the new life in justification brings the principle of works and the Law into justification.

There is the classic modern "ecumenical" mistake in the Common Statement that differences in doctrine are called "differences of emphasis", when the differences, from the point of the Scriptures, are conspicuous, and should have been insurmountable barriers.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should not have let hints of universalism go unchallenged, such as the view that "the Holy Spirit has been present to human beings through the whole of human history" (§6). For the Holy Spirit has bound people not to expect His work apart from the hearing of the Gospel and the reception of the Sacraments.

The representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia should have disallowed as unscriptural the Roman Catholic rejection of the teaching that the justified person is justified and a sinner at the same time (§7).

Roman Catholic claims that they teach "assurance of salvation" (§ 10) are hollow without rejection of the unscriptural cult of the saints and teaching about purgatory.

Another major omission is the failure to reject the Roman view that God's grace is infused into human beings, and in them. This confuses grace and the effects of grace. Rather grace is God's unmerited favour towards sinners, which remains solely in Him. In spite of the claim that there is "substantially the same doctrine" it is not so.

There is an awful implication for the representatives of the Lutheran Church of Australia in withdrawing the condemnations of the Roman Catholic position in the Lutheran Confessions as if they had authority to do it on behalf of anyone except themselves. The awful implication for them is that, if the Lutheran Confessions were correct, their condemnations now fall on them also!

Our Positive Theses in Reply, on the Basis of the Scriptures

1. Justification means that God counts, credits, or reckons the sinner as righteous in His sight for Christ's sake (Rm 4:3-8, 2 Cor 5:19). The obverse is that, when God forgives our debts, He does not count, credit, or reckon them against us.
2. Since God justifies freely, without the Law, and without works, faith is not a meritorious virtue. It is not itself a work. (Rm 3:21-28, Eph 2:8-9) Because human beings are totally corrupt by nature, they are unable of themselves to freely accept God's grace. Faith is merely the reception of God's gift, or confidence in Jesus Christ's work, as the Redeemer (Eph 2: 1-9). The kingdom is for the poor in spirit, for those who are like children, who can do nothing but receive (Mt 5:3; Lk 10:21; Lk 18:15-17).
3. Since God commands "You shall not covet", coveting, concupiscence, or the desire to sin, is itself sin (Rm 7:7-11).
4. An unspiritual person cannot know the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:14). The person whom God justifies is sinful, wicked, ungodly (Rm 4:6).
5. Though faith works through love, and though genuine faith is never alone (Gl 5:6; Jm 2:17-24), a person is justified through faith alone (Rm 3:28). This doctrine alone gives glory to God and affords real comfort and assurance to terrified consciences.
6. If, after justification, a person thinks that he does not sin, he deceives himself (1 Jn 1:8; Rm 7:14-25).
7. Genuine teaching of the truth of the Gospel cannot tolerate another Gospel. Differences from God's truth make us free, not calling them "different emphases", as if they were equally correct before God (Joh 8:31-32; Gl 1:8-9; Rm 16:17).
8. Faith comes through hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ (Rm 10: 17) Where there is no Word of Christ there is no Holy Spirit at work in the world.
9. Mary is not a redeemer alongside of Christ. The works of the saints cannot benefit us at all. It is appointed to human beings once to die and after that the judgment. Scripture knows nothing about purgatory. Since faith is confidence in Christ, fulfilled the Law for us, and who gave Himself up for us, we have the assurance that, because God justifies us, nothing can condemn us, that God is for us, that nothing can be against us (Rm 8:31-39).
10. Charismatic gifts are gifts in human beings. That is what Paul meant when he said "Stir up the gift that is in you." It is mistaken to think of Mary or any person as "full of grace." God's grace is His unmerited favour towards sinners, His love, His mercy, His compassion, for Christ's sake, which remains in Him, and which He displays to sinners.
11. God's declaration, "Not guilty for Christ's sake" is not a process. We are justified and saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, without works, for Christ's sake (Rm 3-4). This is the chief teaching of the Christian faith, the article on which the church stands or falls.