

JUSTIFICATION: BY FAITH AND THROUGH GRACE

In paragraphs 25-27, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) addresses how the churches' understanding of justification relates to their expressions of faith and grace.

First, Catholics and Lutherans (and by their ratification of the JDDJ, other churches) together confess that faith is the basis of justification. Salvation is granted by God, not earned by mankind. Faith necessarily involves the Christian in active love, but whatever good works a person does – whether before or after God's free gift of faith – are never the reason for one's justification. Justification is not a "reward" for our actions, but is always a free gift from God. God never "owes us" because of any good works we have done.

We confess together that sinners are justified by faith in the saving action of God in Christ. By the action of the Holy Spirit in baptism, they are granted the gift of salvation, which lays the basis for the whole Christian life. They place their trust in God's gracious promise by justifying faith, which includes hope in God and love for him. Such a faith is active in love and thus the Christian cannot and should not remain without works. But whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is neither the basis of justification nor merits it. [JDDJ, #25]

The Lutheran emphasis on "justification by faith alone" is meant to reflect the absolute reliance on God's gracious action in man's salvation. Placing full trust in God, we live in communion with him and his action within us leads to a life of hope and love. Lutherans consider the action of justification and the personal renewal that follows it as a unified whole with distinct parts. Although these parts may be looked at individually, they cannot be separated in reality. Renewal is not an optional result of justification, but is indeed a sign that justifying faith exists.

According to Lutheran understanding, God justifies sinners in faith alone (sola fide). In faith they place their trust wholly in their Creator and Redeemer and thus live in communion with him. God himself effects faith as he brings forth such trust by his creative word. Because God's act is a new creation, it affects all dimensions of the person and leads to a life in hope and love. In the doctrine of "justification by faith alone," a distinction but not a separation is made between justification itself and the renewal of one's way of life that necessarily follows from justification and without which faith does not exist. Thereby the basis is indicated from which the renewal of life proceeds, for it comes forth from the love of God imparted to the person in justification. Justification and renewal are joined in Christ, who is present in faith. [JDDJ, #26].

Catholic belief also considers faith to be indispensable for justification. We hear God's word and believe in it, thereby accepting God's forgiveness and justifying grace. Through Christ, we enter into a new relationship with God, one that comes about, not through any merit of ours, but solely because of God's free gift of salvation. Receiving faith, love, and hope from Christ, we are in communion with him and the entire People of God, counted among the righteous because of his actions, not our own. Because of our dependence on God's free, salvific action, we have no claim on justification – i.e., we cannot demand from God forgiveness because of what we ourselves have done. We owe our justification solely to what God has done for us. Even living out our faith, through deeds of love and hope, depends on God moving us to action and gives us no claim to our own justification.

The Catholic understanding also sees faith as fundamental in justification. For without faith, no justification can take place. Persons are justified through baptism as hearers of the word and believers in it. The justification of sinners is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace, which makes us children of God. In justification the righteous receive from Christ faith, hope, and love and are thereby taken into communion with him. This new personal relation to God is grounded totally on God's graciousness and remains constantly dependent on the salvific and creative working of this gracious God, who remains true to himself, so that one can rely upon him. Thus justifying grace never becomes a human possession to which one could appeal over against God. While Catholic teaching emphasizes the renewal of life by justifying grace, 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 (Rom 3:27). [JDDJ, # 27]

If we remember this basic truth about justification – that it depends on God's graciousness and not our actions – we will avoid saying things like:

- He's earned his heaven because of what he suffered.
- God owes her a place in heaven because of what she's been through on earth.
- She's a saint – she deserves her place in heaven.
- He's done so much for others, God will have to be merciful with him.

And if others make these or similar statements, it may give us an opportunity to bring them to a better appreciation of our faith's understanding of justification.