

## **Proposal of a Reformed Signing Statement to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification**

1. By a new ecumenical consensus, the doctrine of justification by faith represents the heart of the Gospel. Agreement about what the doctrine means is therefore of the highest importance. In recent years a welcome degree of convergence has been worked out by the Roman Catholics, the Lutherans, and the Methodists. In 1999, after many years of painstaking dialogue, The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed by the Catholics and the Lutherans. It was then ratified by the Methodists in 2006. What was once the flash-point of the Reformation has settled into relative concord. The mutual anathemas of the 16th century, while still accepted as salutary warnings, have been laid aside as not applying to the present.

2. We, the Reformed Churches of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, are ready to join in this ecumenical concord. We express our joy and gratitude for the great gains that have been made. At the same time we wish to point to areas in need of further clarification and dialogue. We hope to affirm, enrich and extend the existing degree of consensus.

3. We acknowledge that the common understanding of justification as it is outlined in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ §§14-18) corresponds to Reformed doctrine. We are especially grateful for the approach by which God's work of salvation is explained in a Trinitarian and Christocentric way.

4. We affirm the importance of listening. In ecumenical dialogues we earn the right to speak only as we have listened first and listened much more than we speak. (§14)

5. We agree with the common affirmation that justification is the work of the triune God. The good news of the gospel is that God has reconciled the world to himself through the Son and in the Spirit. Justification presupposes and is grounded in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification means that Christ himself is our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). Entering into union with him through the Holy Spirit, by means of word and sacrament, we receive a share in his saving righteousness. By grace alone, through faith in Christ's saving work -- and not because of any merit on our part -- we are accepted by God. In Christ the Spirit renews our hearts while equipping us to do the good works that God has prepared for us to walk in. (§15)

6. We also agree that God calls all people to salvation in Christ. When we receive this salvation by grace through faith, we are justified by Christ alone. Faith is God's gift through the Holy Spirit. By word and sacrament in the community of faith, the Spirit leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life. (§16)

7. We further concur that the message of justification directs us in a special way to the heart of the New Testament witness. Based on God's saving action in Christ, justification tells us

that as sinners we depend entirely on grace. Our new life in Christ is due solely to God's forgiving and renewing mercy. This mercy is imparted to us as a gift, which we receive through faith, and never can merit in any way. (§17)

8. With the Lutherans we agree that justification is an indispensable criterion of the gospel, but with the Catholics we affirm that other criteria are equally important as well. (§18)

9. We accept what Lutherans and Roman Catholics say together about some of the crucial issues in the doctrine of justification that since the 16th century had long divided them (cf. JDDJ §§19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37). Moreover, we accept the explanations, which Lutherans and Catholics offer in paragraphs §§20-21, 23-24, 26-27, 29-30, 32-33, 35-36, and 38-39 concerning their respective positions on these issues. We do not consider these differing viewpoints as sufficient cause for division between either one of these parties and the Reformed.

10. The Reformed tradition has always understood itself as deeply indebted to the biblical teaching about justification as it was set forth by Luther, Calvin and the other reformers. At the same time it has also embraced elements of the doctrine of justification, which belong to the Catholic tradition of the early church both East and West. This gave the Reformed doctrine of justification a distinctive profile. Relative to "the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis" which are seen as not impairing the "consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification" between Lutherans and Catholics (JDDJ §40), the Reformed teaching may be described as follows:

11. According to the Reformed tradition the doctrine of original sin is an essential Christian doctrine. The corruption of human nature cannot be undone by ourselves. The destructive effects of the Fall are overcome by the saving initiative of the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. We depend completely on God for our salvation, and justification occurs solely by God's grace. What Christ has accomplished by his saving obedience (*extra nos*) is made known and applied to us (*in nobis*) by the Spirit especially through God's word and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. No one can respond to God's call apart from God's prior work of grace. (§19)

12. Insofar as consent to God's justifying action is understood as a gift of grace, we would agree with the Catholics. This consent is an aspect of faith. (§20) We would also agree strongly with the Lutherans that no one can possibly contribute to his or her own justification. (§21)

13. Because sin is both a guilt and a power, God's grace brings both forgiveness and liberation. God's forgiveness absolves us of our guilt (justification), and God's liberation frees us from bondage to sin so that our faith might be active in love (sanctification). Union with Christ, according to Reformed teaching, is source of these two saving benefits. (§22)

14. According to Reformed understanding, it is through our participation in Christ by faith that we receive a saving share in his righteousness before God (justification) and enter into

life-long repentance (sanctification). We therefore agree with the Lutherans that "the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness" (§23) and with the Catholics that "God's forgiving grace always brings with it a gift of new life." (§24)

15. It is Reformed teaching that sinners are justified by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). Grace is the source and ground of justification while faith is the instrument of its reception. The whole of the Christian life is a life of trust in the promises of God. Faith cannot truly exist without love and hope, and faith without works is dead. Love for God and the neighbor is therefore indispensable to faith. Works of love, however, are not the basis of justification. Justification is a free gift that cannot be merited in any way. (§25)

16. According to Reformed understanding, justification and sanctification both flow from union with Christ. We therefore agree with the Lutherans when they state that "justification and renewal are joined in Christ, who is present to faith." We also agree with them that sinners are justified by faith alone (*sola fide*) and that God brings forth faith through the proclamation of God's Word. (§26)

17. The Reformed teach that our adoption as God's children takes place as we are joined to Christ through faith. We are made righteous before God in Christ by free grace while still being only imperfectly righteous in ourselves. At the same time we agree with the Catholics when they emphasize that justifying grace brings renewal of life and that this renewal "contributes nothing to justification." (§27)

18. According to Reformed understanding, we remain dependent on God's grace, through word and sacrament, throughout our lives. Grace is never something we merely possess. As we call upon the name of the Lord, it is something we receive decisively once and for all as well as perpetually again and again. In our struggle against "the old Adam," we must pray for forgiveness every day. God's grace is new every morning. (§28)

19. We agree with the Lutherans that believers are "righteous and sinners at the same time" (*simul iustus et peccator*). Because there is a sense in which righteousness and sin are categorical before they can be matters of degree, we also agree with them that as believers we are "completely righteous" in Christ while still being "completely sinners" in ourselves (*totus/totus*) before God. Nevertheless, because the enslaving power of sin has been broken, sin no longer has dominion over us. By grace we are continually made free to lead new lives of justice and love. (§29)

20. According to Reformed understanding, all sin, whether large or small, and whether original or actual, is worthy of divine condemnation. We agree with the Catholics that concupiscence must be distinguished from deliberate consent, and that concupiscence is not the same as natural desire, but we also hold that disordered and unwholesome desires are an expression of human sinfulness as condemned by God. (§30)

21. We agree that "Christ has fulfilled the law by his death and resurrection" and that he has overcome the law "as a way of salvation." We are therefore justified by faith "apart from

works of the law" (Rom. 3:28). The teaching and example of Christ establish a standard for our conduct. The commandments of God also remain valid for our lives as believers. (§31)

22. According to Reformed understanding, the law remains a norm for the conduct of the Christian life (as agreed in the previous section). We affirm with the Lutherans that the law also serves to disclose and accuse us of our sin. The law is rightly used when it drives us to God's mercy in Christ. (§32)

23. We receive with gladness the Catholic statement that "through Jesus Christ God has mercifully promised to his children the grace of eternal life." We affirm that what God intends will be fulfilled and that the good work God has begun in us will be brought to completion. (§33)

24. We believe that because the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29), the gift of faith includes the assurance of salvation. Faith without assurance would be deficient or confused. Assurance is based primarily not on anything in ourselves -- whether faith, works, or evidences of the Holy Spirit -- but on Christ and the promises of God. (§34)

25. The Reformed believe that assurance is linked to the doctrine of election. Divine election underscores that our salvation is grounded solely in the grace of Christ, because we were chosen in him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). The Reformed therefore agree with the Lutherans that when falling into the grip of anxiety about our salvation, we should "look solely to Christ and trust only in him." (§35)

26. According to Reformed understanding, in Christ God faithfully promises our salvation. We therefore welcome the Catholic affirmations that faith is grounded in "the objective reality of God's promise" and that the divine promise cannot be considered untrustworthy. (§36)

27. We agree that good works are the fruit of faith. We also agree that good works can only be done in dependence on God's grace. (§37)

28. We agree with the beautiful statement by Therese of Lisieux as quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#2011): "After earth's exile, I hope to go and enjoy you in the fatherland, but I do not want to lay up merits for heaven. I want to work for your love alone. ... In the evening of this life, I shall appear before you with empty hands, for I do not ask you, Lord, to count my works. All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in your own justice and to receive from your love the eternal possession of yourself." Justification and eternal life are both unmerited gifts. (§38)

29. We strongly agree with the Lutherans that our participation in Christ's righteousness is not partial but always complete. On the basis of Christ's righteousness as received by grace through faith, eternal life is an unmerited reward in which God's promise to the believer is fulfilled. (§39)

30. One specific area not treated in the Joint Declaration is of special concern to the Reformed. It deserves to be mentioned as a topic for further clarification and dialogue:

31. The Reformed are concerned that the Joint Declaration remains silent about the relationship between justification and justice. A recent and very important confession of faith coming out of the Reformed tradition is the Belhar Confession. This confession makes very clear that there is a very clear relationship between justification and justice because “God has revealed himself as the one who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people.”<sup>1</sup> It has to be very clear that “we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> An even more recent confession is the Accra Confession. This statement of faith is very outspoken in pointing towards the injustice of the global economic situation and makes clear that “global economic justice is essential to the integrity of our faith in God and our discipleship as Christians.”<sup>3</sup> It is also very outspoken in its desire that all may have life in abundance: “... therefore we reject any church practice or teaching which excludes the poor and care for creation, in its mission; giving comfort to those who come to ‘steal, kill and destroy’ (John 10.10) rather than following the ‘Good Shepherd’ who has come for life for all (John 10.11).”<sup>4</sup> And thus according to Reformed understanding, justification and justice cannot be separated, because doctrine is inseparable from ethics. Therefore, we would urge the following:

32. Justification means the removal of injustice, the prevailing of mercy, the restitution of the sinner, and the imperative to seek justice for the oppressed. It means that all our disorders are rectified and that the world is reconciled to God. It means that in the time between the times, the church, in love and witness to Christ, is called to stand against all social disorders, and for justice, freedom and peace in the world.

33. Most especially, it means solidarity with the victims of social disorder and opposition to systems of social and economic injustice. Justification means the inclusion of the excluded, the acceptance of the rejected, and the embracing of the humiliated and the marginalized. We cannot be conformed to Christ, whose heart was moved to look upon our sin as our misery, without seeking to alleviate the misery of those most in need at the bottom of society.

34. To establish justice on earth for the poor, the excluded and the oppressed, God always stands on this and only on this side, always against the exalted and for the lowly, always against those who already have rights and for those from whom they are robbed and taken away.

35. As Reformed Christians we are grateful that on the basis of such an agreement as this, Lutheran and Reformed Churches in some countries have recognized one another as belonging to the one Church of Jesus Christ and have declared full communion of pulpit and table. It is our deep hope that in the near future we shall also be able to enter into closer relationship with Lutherans in other places and with the Roman Catholic Church, as well as with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Belhar Confession § 4.

<sup>2</sup> Belhar Confession § 4.

<sup>3</sup> Accra Confession, § 15.

<sup>4</sup> Accra Confession, § 28.

Methodists, in accordance with this declaration of our common understanding of the doctrine of justification.

#### OFFICIAL COMMON AFFIRMATION

In this Statement the World Communion of Reformed Churches and its member churches affirm their fundamental doctrinal agreement with the teaching expressed in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification signed at Augsburg on 31 October 1999 on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church and as ratified by the Methodists on 23 July 2006.

The signing partners of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification join together in welcoming the above Statement of the World Communion of Reformed Churches and its member churches, which declares and demonstrates Reformed agreement with the consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification as expressed in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

Building on their shared affirmation of basic truths of the doctrine of justification, the four parties commit themselves to strive together for the deepening of their common understanding of justification in theological study, teaching and preaching.

The present achievement and commitment are viewed by Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists and Reformed as part of their pursuit of the full communion and common witness to the world which is the will of Christ for all Christians.