



NEWS

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CATHOLIC, LUTHERAN SCHOLARS ISSUE STUDY ON JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

WASHINGTON--Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians have published the results of a five-year study on the question of "justification by faith" which finds common ground, though not total agreement, on a matter which has divided the churches since the 16th century Reformation.

At issue is the question of how sinful men and women attain salvation. Though the differences between the Lutheran and Catholic traditions on this thorny question were at times thought to be irreconcilable, they need not, in fact, be divisive, according to the joint declaration.

"We emphatically agree that the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ is the source and center of all Christian life and of the existence and work of the church," the theologians said. "In brief, hope and trust for salvation are gifts of the Holy Spirit and finally rest solely on God in Christ.

"Agreement on this christological affirmation does not necessarily involve full agreement between Catholics and
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Lutherans on justification by faith, but it does raise the question...whether the remaining differences need be church-dividing," the theologians said. "Our intent in presenting this statement is to help our churches see how and why they can and should increasingly proclaim together the one, undivided gospel of God's saving mercy in Jesus Christ."

The 21,000 word document, which was completed at a meeting in Milwaukee in mid-September, is the latest paper to emerge from a theological dialogue which Roman Catholics and Lutherans in the United States have carried out since 1965. The discussions concern doctrines that have united or separated their churches since the sixteenth century and have been conducted under the auspices of the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA) of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and Lutheran World Ministries, which jointly released the document. Co-chairmen of the dialogue are the Rev. Dr. H. George Anderson, President of Luther College in Iowa, and Auxiliary Bishop T. Austin Murphy of Baltimore.

The document contains lengthy sections on pre-Reformation theological trends, the Reformation debate on justification, modern historical development and new biblical understandings and interpretations on righteousness-justification themes.

It also contains a 12-point section on the theologians' "convergences" on the justification issue and a 500-word

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"Common declaration." The drafting committee for the paper was composed of six members of the 20-member dialogue team: (Lutherans) Dr. George Lindbeck of Yale, the Rev. Dr. John H.P. Reumann of the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, and the Rev. Dr. Eric Gritsch of the Theological Seminary in Philadelphia; (Catholics) Fathers Avery Dulles, S.J., and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. of the Catholic University of America and Father George Tavard of the Methodist Theological School, Delaware, Ohio.

The Catholic and Lutheran authors of the document said they still had "remaining differences on theological formulations" but had reached "fundamental consensus" on the central doctrinal issue.

In declaring that mankind is radically dependent on God's free mercy and promise, the statement rejected attempts to depict Catholic teaching as holding that people earn or merit their salvation. It also rejected a caricature of Lutheran tradition suggesting that good works and other behavior are irrelevant to salvation.

In speaking of differences in approach between the two traditions concerning the matter of merit, for example, the theologians commented, "Both Lutherans and Catholics hold that, thanks to the inner renewal that comes from justification, the justified can, do, and must perform good works."

Lutherans, they said, are concerned that "Catholic ways of thinking and speaking about merit can lead to a legalism that derogates from the unconditional character of God's justifying word." Catholics, they said, "admit that merit

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has often been preached in a self-righteous way bordering on legalism."

Both sides agreed that merit, understood as bringing to fruition "what God's grace has initiated," is a part of the teaching of both Catholics and Lutherans--even though Lutherans would tend to use different terms and "the two sides have difficulty in finding a common language."

In the "Declaration" concluding their agreement, the two sides declared their shared, total reliance on the gospel, saying "We are willing to be judged by it in all our thoughts and actions, our philosophies and projects, our theologies and religious practices."

Earlier topics completed by the Lutheran and Roman Catholic scholars over the past 18 years brought forth statements on the Nicene Creed, 1965; Baptism, 1966; Eucharist as Sacrifice, 1967; Eucharist as Ministry, 1970; Papal Primacy, 1974; and Papal Infallibility and Teaching Authority, 1978. An eighth paper, on Mary and the Saints, was begun at the meeting in Milwaukee.

The Lutheran-Roman Catholic statement on justification by faith will be published complete with footnotes in the October 6 issue of "Origins," the documentary service of the National Catholic News Service.

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