

Jesus Christ is our righteousness, our sanctification and our salvation

A statement by the Faith and Order Commission of the German Council of Churches (DÖSTA)
and a declaration by the General Assembly of the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK)
20 years after the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification"

1. The intensive reception of the declaration is an ecumenical sign of hope.

On 31 October 1999 the "Official Common Statement" was signed in Augsburg by Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church and Christian Krause on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation. On the basis of the elucidations formulated in the "Annex", they reaffirmed officially from both sides the "consensus reached in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JD)* regarding basic truths". The "Official Common Statement" confirms "that the mutual condemnations of former times do not apply to the Catholic and Lutheran doctrines of justification as they are presented in the *Joint Declaration*".¹

Together Lutherans and Catholics can say: "Justification takes place 'by grace alone' (...), by faith alone, the person is justified 'apart from works'" (OCS Annex C). Remaining differences "of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis in the understanding of justification" are considered "acceptable". For the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation, one of the most important controversial issues of the 16th century had been handled in such a way that it could be ascertained that the remaining differences no longer had a church-dividing effect.

In the meantime, the World Methodist Council (2006), the Anglican Communion (2016) and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (2017) have expressed their broad agreement with the results, whereby the Methodist and Reformed churches even affirm "their fundamental doctrinal agreement" with the "Joint Declaration". For them as well, the lasting differences in the emphases of justification are no longer seen as a cause for division.

This broad reception represents a success that can hardly be overestimated ecumenically. Even if not all members of the Council of Churches have declared their agreement, an originally bilateral document has now become multilateral. In its study of 2006, "Accepted by God – Transformed by Christ", the Faith and Order Commission of the German Council of Churches acknowledged the "Joint Declaration" as an ecumenical "milestone" and at the same time made a new evaluation of the depth and breadth of the message of justification by relating it to multilateral ecumenism.²

At the end of March 2019, representatives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Anglican Communion issued the "Notre Dame Consultation Statement", expressing their support for further steps on the way to deeper communion and full visible unity of the Church. In this statement the participants say that their communions are witnesses that "centuries-old controversies" are being overcome by the process in connection with the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification". They emphasise the urgency of the message of God's grace "in our time", and commit themselves to "communicate this message to people of our time in meaningful and relevant ways through our common witness and service". They "re-affirm the basic truths of the doctrine of justification which are expressed in the Joint Declaration, emphasising that the message of God's grace is powerful and urgently needed in our time"; in addition, they stress "that

justification calls for sanctification, a holiness of life which is both personal and social, and advances a common commitment to resisting and overcoming injustices".³

All Christian traditions are called upon to show how their own heritage can be made accessible ecumenically for the formulation of theological and ecclesial statements and constructively incorporated into the common Christian witness.

2. The convergences in the understanding of justification have increased.

Churches which have established their broad agreement with the "Joint Declaration" are deepening their understanding of God's salvation in Jesus Christ through ecumenical dialogue. On the one hand, they have accepted the results of the ecumenical dialogues as an enrichment of their own forms of language and understanding; on the other hand, they have introduced new aspects into the discussion on justification out of their own respective traditions. The basic theological truths expressed in the "Joint Declaration" are mutually recognised. Thus there is agreement in all traditions that the salvation of human beings is completely dependent on the prevenient grace of God.

The approaches made during the process of reception that have led further towards a deeper understanding of justification can only be outlined briefly here. Methodists emphasise the close connection between justification and sanctification as two sides of God's action of grace. The Reformed accentuate the significance of Christ's teaching and example for a Christian life with God's grace at work; they emphasise the connection between justification and justice. Anglicans share with Lutherans a common understanding of God's justifying grace, and with Catholics the importance of sanctification and the essential role of the church in the mediation of salvation. All the families of churches mentioned also have close ties with one another despite all differences, and their particular characteristics make a substantial contribution to the ecumenical understanding of justification.

The reception of the "Joint Declaration" goes far beyond the signatory churches. The entire reception can only be represented here paradigmatically.

In order to express their doctrine of salvation, the Orthodox churches do not usually use the term "justification", but prefer to conform with the (mostly Greek) Church Fathers in speaking of divinisation (*theosis*) and sanctification. But they can follow the content of the "Joint Declaration" insofar as it expresses a common conviction of all Orthodox Churches, namely that the salvation of human beings is not achieved by their works, but by what Jesus did for us, above all by his death and resurrection. They recognise that in the New Testament texts diverse interpretations of the action of salvation are to be found, which do not exclude each other but illustrate the boundlessness of the divine mystery of salvation. This means that the Orthodox churches consider that the "Joint Declaration" has decisively contributed to the fact that today there is no longer anything that divides the churches with regard to the doctrine of salvation, but only legitimate differences and emphases.

The Old Catholic Church in Germany has established a consensus with the EKD in the understanding of justification: "[W]e are considered righteous before God and made righteous solely by grace through faith on the basis of the work of salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ and not on the basis of our own works and merits. The Church is therefore the communion of justified sinners, enabled by the Holy Spirit to live a life of service to all people and of praise to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit"⁴. In the German Old Catholic Church, it has been suggested that a discussion process should begin within the Union of Utrecht aimed at the Union's formal association with the "Joint Declaration".

Through the theological discussions, Protestant traditions which have not yet acceded to the "Joint Declaration" have also gained important new insights into the gift of salvation. The Old Lutherans

emphasise God's entitlement to pass final judgment on sinful humans, without denying the transforming power of the justification promised by belief. The Baptist and Anabaptist-Mennonite traditions underline the close connection between justification and sanctification and between God's grace and human freedom: a human being should accept God's action of grace and follow the path of discipleship.

The promise of justification is so great in its original biblical testimony that it is possible to open up different approaches and to set different accents that are not mutually exclusive. The discovery of such a wide spectrum represents an important ecumenical learning effect, which has borne fruit in the course of the reception of the "Joint Declaration".

3. Criticism must be taken seriously, and desiderata must be named.

There was no lack of objections to the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification", both before and after the signing. They came from different sides, whereby an organised protest by Protestant professors gained particular attention from the media, but also came from individual member churches of the ACK. Issues raised were the way in which the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" determines the relationship between God's grace and human contribution, how it describes the connection between the forgiveness of sins and new life, how it sees the continuing sinfulness of humans against the background of their justification, and what reason it provides for human salvation at the Last Judgment. A further subject of discussion was whether the significance of the doctrine of justification as a criterion for the faith and life of the church had been adequately acknowledged. The Orthodox side posed the question as to whether the declaration had taken sufficient consideration of the aspect of the divinisation of humans in redemption. It was repeatedly criticised that hardly any specific consequences emerge from the "Joint Declaration" with regard to the formation of inter-church communion.

Constructive criticism is valued by Roman Catholics and Lutherans, by Methodists, Reformed and Anglicans as a helpful enhancement of their own understanding. The discussion shows that even within the ranks of the ACK it is still necessary to clarify the extent to which remaining differences are compatible with a fundamental consensus. This raises the question of the scope and viability of the method of "differentiated consensus". The doctrine of justification must neither be overemphasised one-sidedly in relation to the overall biblical testimony, nor devalued in its critical profile and guiding force.

The whole process is an encouragement to secure, deepen and spread the fruits of the continuing multilateral ecumenical discussion on justification. The common reflection on the significance of the message of the salvation of humans through Christ today and on the specific role played by the doctrine of justification is a joint task for the whole of Christendom.

4. It is important to develop the message of justification theologically today.

The biblical message of justification was rediscovered by the Reformation. This discovery took place against the background of people's experiences in the area of Latin Christendom in the 16th century. People's experiences, beliefs and feelings are today very different from those of the past. Nevertheless, the message of justification has lost none of its topicality.

In the "Joint Declaration" it was only possible to summarise the biblical testimony briefly; that is why it contained the commitment to issue a more detailed study. This commitment was fulfilled by the

joint theological work of an international task force of Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Reformed theologians on the biblical foundations of the doctrine of justification⁵. The Old Testament witness and the message of the Gospels were explored with particular intensity. In the analysis of Paul's writings, it was a question of taking up the results of the latest research, so that the salvation of the individual, which had moved into the main focus of the theology of the West, was accompanied by interpretative approaches emphasising the unity of faith and the missionary power of witness, and also revealing the social and political dimensions. At the same time, this study presented an interpretation of the doctrine of justification which is decidedly committed to the renewal of the Judeo-Christian relationship. The study was able to demonstrate how deeply the ecumenical consensus is rooted in the testimony of Holy Scripture and to point to the strong stimuli for a modern-day interpretation which deals both with people's hope of salvation and with the unity and mission of the church in the world.

While reconsidering the present significance of the message of justification, it is necessary to make the gospel of salvation understandable on the basis of people's present-day experiences. They have in common the feeling that all is not well with the world; they are aware that conflicts are rife and peace threatened, and that it is difficult to live a reconciled life across generations. From this point of view, it is possible to convey the concept which theology calls "sin". But it is hard to explain the significance of the message of justification in this context. It cannot be misunderstood as a *carte blanche*, as an excuse for negligence and indifference or even for acts of injustice. The call to repentance and the warning of God's judgment retain their importance when proclaiming the justification of sinful people. The message of justification reminds us that all people are sinners, and no one can merit the mercy of God. It is true for all human beings that God alone in his love keeps the path to true life open for human beings. The message of justification challenges people to confess their sin, repent and lead a new life. The message of justification invites people to give thanks. They can allow God to grant them reconciliation and renewal. They can trust that God will lead them into a healing relationship with himself and with one another.

5. After 20 years, the "Joint Declaration" is an encouragement and a challenge to us all.

The theme of justification has found particular manifestation in the theologies of the Western churches, even though the impulses of biblical, especially Pauline, theology are important for the whole of Christendom. Multilateral ecumenism, as it is practised in the ACK, is the right environment for conducting conversations and deepening understanding of the message of justification.

The strong responses as well as the critical reactions reflect the theological significance of the message of justification which already develops a threefold dimension from its biblical origin. It offers hope in God to people who are crying out for salvation in their need and sin; it strengthens missionary witness and brings together in the one Church of Jesus Christ people from very diverse backgrounds, because they share the common faith; and it develops a social perspective by placing human coexistence under the sign of God's righteousness, first of all in the Church,.

The DÖSTA urges the Christian churches to see it as their task to re-affirm jointly the status of the doctrine of justification as a criterion of truth, unity and freedom of faith. They are challenged to reformulate the message of justification in today's language, and to recall theological insights in order to join together in telling of God's love for all people, regardless of their sin. The message of justification has gained a disturbing topicality through the abuse of spiritual power in our churches; it does not excuse anything, but testifies that it is God himself who gives a voice to the victims and

promises to transcend human possibilities by providing rescue after the judgment, which threatened to end in disaster.

Today the ACK member churches can join in transmitting the biblical message of justification. Many people are burdened by the permanent obligation to justify themselves. But people who stand before God are released from guilt and made righteous by God's love, irrespective of other people's condemnations or their own striving for self-assertion. At the same time, trust in the truth of God's boundless and liberating love deepens the believers' relationship to God and enables them to grow as they follow Jesus. Our life and its success do not depend on performance, but are promised to us as a gift from the God who loves us. This is precisely the foundation for the dignity of every human being and the value of every person.

On the basis of their common understanding of justification, and of the remaining differences, ACK member churches are committed to strive for the visible unity of the Church, which the "Charta Oecumenica" of 2001 identifies, on the European level, as the goal of the ecumenical movement, echoing the worldwide ecumenical concerns. The unity of faith, for which Jesus prayed, is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Just as the message of justification already gave Paul a strong impulse for mission to the nations, so it continues to be an impulse to witness to Jesus Christ in words and deeds – and to start with ourselves as we repent of our self-centredness and turn to listening to God's Word.

20 years after the signing of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" it is time to reflect together in multilateral ecumenism on the liberating message of justification. It is always up to date. Its significance for the cooperation and witness of the churches must and can be rediscovered.

Declaration of the General Assembly of the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK)

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the signing of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" on Reformation Day 1999, the General Assembly of the ACK gratefully approves the statement by the Faith and Order Commission of the German Council of Churches and confirms the call for multilateral discussion on the message of justification. It advocates,

- that the message of the justifying goodness of God be proclaimed in church worship, that communion in faith be deepened and that events on Reformation Day, 31 October, be conducted in an ecumenical spirit;
- that preaching and catechesis pay attention to the message of justification in such a way that people's experiences get a hearing: their suffering, their need and their sin, but also their thankfulness for the faith, their love for God and their neighbours, their hope of reconciliation and redemption;
- that room is allowed for people to experience the liberating message of justification in their daily lives, their work and social engagement, so that they can pass it on in a way that serves God's righteousness;
- that further progress is achieved in the relationship of the churches to one another, in accordance with God's will, on the way to visible unity in reconciled diversity.

The members of the Council of Churches place their confidence in the words of the apostle Paul, which remind us of God's promise: "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30 NRSV).

¹ *Lutheran World Federation – Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity*, Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Joint official statement. Annex to the Official Common Statement, Frankfurt - Paderborn 1990. For genesis and reception cf. *Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre. Dokumentation des Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsprozesses*, edited by Friedrich Hauschildt together with Udo Hahn and Andreas Siemens in consultation with the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Göttingen 2009.

² cf. *Uwe Swarat - Johannes Oeldemann - Dagmar Heller* (ed.): *Accepted by God - Transformed by Christ. The Doctrine of Justification in Multilateral Ecumenical Dialogue. A Study on the Doctrine of Justification by the German Ecumenical Study Commission (DÖSTA)*, Geneva 2008.

³ cf. *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity - Lutheran World Federation - World Methodist Council - Anglican Communion - World Communion of Reformed Churches*, Statement of the Notre Dame Consultation, available on the Internet at: https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2019/documents/190303-jddj_nd_statement_final-en.pdf.

⁴ Agreement on a mutual invitation to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist between the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Catholic Diocese of the Old Catholics in Germany from 29 March 1985, No. 3, in: *Materialdienst des Konfessionskundlichen Instituts* 36, 1985, 77.

⁵ cf. *Biblische Grundlagen der Rechtfertigungslehre. Eine ökumenische Studie zur Gemeinsamen Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre*. Commissioned by the Lutheran World Federation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council, presented by a task force of Old Testament, New Testament and systematic theologians, edited by Walter Klaiber, Leipzig - Paderborn 2012.