

Statement by the Committee on the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification of South African Churches

Introduction

In John 17, Jesus prayed for his followers to be one, so that through them the brokenness of the world may be healed. However, often the church has been divided. Therefore, prompted by the Spirit, there have been many initiatives to make real the unity Jesus prayed for.

In 1999 the Roman Catholic Church and the churches of the Lutheran World Federation signed a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). In 2006, the Methodists associated themselves to this.

The JDDJ is one such an initiative and is a milestone in the process of our recovery in the understanding of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.

In view of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and its consequent divisions, some Southern African churches, wish to continue to commit themselves to the unity for which Jesus prayed.

Explanation

Many millions of years ago earth had only one big continent. But then, perhaps due to a meteorite strike, this one continent broke apart, and, as the earth plates moved, the current seven continents and hundreds, thousands, of islands were formed. Over the millennia each continent experienced its own developments of living species and subspecies, becoming a biosphere on its own.

500 years ago a “meteorite” struck the Church, resulting in a massive “continental drift of Churches” – a division that created independent, and often totally isolated groupings. Each one developed its own habits and traditions, a world on its own. During these 500 years these “church continents” often fought against each other, even killing one another. Walls and barriers were set up to protect and preserve, to defend and condemn.

After almost half a millennium of division they sat down to talk, deliberate, discuss. They discovered that at the heart of the teaching on justification they could actually agree! They used different words, different thought patterns, but when listening and understanding one another they realised that they actually agreed in essence. Just as the many continents and islands ultimately are part of the one earth, the many Christian Churches belong to the one Lord.

What does this mean? We are still different and often very much differing Churches, but we realise: not only do we depend on each other – the world needs us to work together. Humanity needs the Church to act, at least occasionally, as this one, global, massive movement of people who serve the same Lord and wish to follow the same one voice of Jesus Christ, our shepherd.

It takes getting used to. The culture of animosity, distrust and condemnation sits deep in our history, in our bones. However, the commemoration of Reformation 500 years ago is also the ideal opportunity to reflect on our being part of this One

Holy Christian Church which spans the ages and the globe.

We call on all our members to reach out to one another – not to avoid talking about faith, but to share with another our insights, our discoveries and our peculiarities.

“Don’t kill the world, she’s all we have” was a very popular song, circling the globe, reminding humans on all continents that our little piece is part of a bigger one, and that we all depend on the health of the globe to survive.

“Don’t kill the Church – she’s all we have” we could say, reminding us that we too depend on one another, and that by strengthening one another we all become stronger, by fighting another, we all become weaker.

We remind ourselves that, in terms of the JDDJ, the condemnations of our past do not apply to the current partners. “Thus the doctrinal condemnations of the 16th century, in so far as they relate to the doctrine of justification, appear in a new light: The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.” There are still matters of importance that need further clarification such as the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, as well as ecclesiology, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, the sacraments and the relation between justification and social ethics. However, the agreement on the core doctrine of justification sets a precedent for all future discussions on topics still dividing us in that it creates a fundamental recognition that we no longer wish to condemn each other.

The JDDJ in Outline

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification has the following headings:

Preamble

1 Biblical Message of Justification

2 The Doctrine of Justification as an Ecumenical Problem

3 The Common Understanding of Justification

4 Explicating the common understanding of Justification

4.1 Human Powerlessness and Sin in relation to Justification

4.2 Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous

4.3 Justification by Faith through Grace

4.4 The Justified as Sinner

4.5 Law and Gospel

4.6 Assurance of Salvation

4.7 The Good Works of the Justified

5 The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached

An important excerpt from the document reads:

14. The Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church have together listened to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture. This common listening, together with the theological conversations of recent years, has led to a shared understanding of justification. This encompasses a consensus in the basic truths; the differing explications in particular statements are compatible with it.

15. In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.

16. All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

17. We also share the conviction that the message of justification directs us in a special way towards the heart of the New Testament witness to God's saving action in Christ: it tells us that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way.

18. Therefore the doctrine of justification, which takes up this message and explicates it, is more than just one part of Christian doctrine. It stands in an essential relation to all truths of faith, which are to be seen as internally related to each other. It is an indispensable criterion which constantly serves to orient all the teaching and practice of our churches to Christ. When Lutherans emphasize the unique significance of this criterion, they do not deny the interrelation and significance of all truths of faith. When Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria, they do not deny the special function of the message of justification. Lutherans and Catholics share the goal of confessing Christ in all things, who alone is to be trusted above all things as the one Mediator (1 Tim 2:5f) through whom God in the Holy Spirit gives himself and pours out his renewing gifts.

The agreement on the core doctrine of justification also includes the recognition of concurrence on such issues as prevenient grace, assurance, sanctification, and Christian perfection.

Conclusion

This significant step in our journey together does not ignore the differences of understanding and interpretation in our traditions, but emphasises that these differences do not undermine the fundamental agreement reached. That agreement implies that as far as this doctrine is concerned, there is no longer cause for conflict between us. On the contrary, it lays the foundation for our mutual recognition of each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, and our determination to work toward further unity, particularly in respect to the differences remaining between us.

Commitment

We commit ourselves to continue the search for Christian unity in the diversity of our expressions and the recovery of the understanding of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ. We commit ourselves to enable all our people, clergy and laity alike, to become aware that we do not condemn the other, but accept each other. We commit ourselves to appreciate the diversity that remains as gift to each other, and to strengthen each other for the united witness of the Gospel of the Grace of God, shown in Christ, to the world.