

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of its Genesis and Impact From a Baptist's Perspective

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Abstract

This essay outlines the genesis and impact of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)* from a Baptist perspective. Starting with comparative studies of individual theologians from 1949 to 1980 it sketches the prehistory of the *JDDJ* including the results of ecumenical dialogues from 1972 to 1994. The essay then presents the origins and contents of the *JDDJ* from the draft version (1997) to the signing (1999), including the development and content of the “Official Common Statement.” The author includes as well the impact of *JDDJ* on the study on “The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification” (2012); the Notre Dame Consultation (2019); and ecumenical dialogues on justification with Baptist participation. The author appreciates the *JDDJ* as the most significant result of ecumenical dialogues since the formation of the ecumenical movement and expresses his hope that the Baptist World Alliance too will assent to the consensus.

Keywords

Justification, joint declaration, Baptists, ecumenical dialogues, Lutherans, Catholics, Methodists, reformed, Anglicans

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The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)* of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman Catholic Church is the most significant result of ecumenical dialogue since the inception of the ecumenical movement at the start of the twentieth century. This was already true of the original document and its signing on October 31, 1999, in Augsburg, and applies even more in light of the history of its impact up to now. For in the meantime, the World Methodist Council, the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), and the Anglican Communion have joined the consensus. The *Joint Declaration* also has a considerably higher status than the reports of the bilateral and multilateral dialogue commissions, because it expresses the official position of the participating Christian world communions. Here the results of the ecumenical dialogues were not only acknowledged but also accepted by the churches—including the Roman Catholic Church.

In regard to its content as well, the *JDDJ* is of the highest significance, for it testifies to a doctrinal consensus in a matter that had a substantial role in the division of the Western Church in the sixteenth century. The division into Catholic and Protestant churches was principally caused by irreconcilable disagreement on the doctrine of grace and justification. In the *JDDJ*, both sides now declare that the condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the teachings put forward by the other partner in the *Joint Declaration*. The division between the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church can no longer be based on disagreement concerning the understanding of justification.

The depth of the earlier disagreement becomes clear when we consider the perceptions that the churches of the sixteenth century had of the teaching on justification held by the other side. The Catholic side held the result of the Reformation teaching on justification to be: no human freedom, no new being, no ethical endeavor, no reward, and no Church (because of the devaluation of baptism). The Protestant side saw the result of the Catholic teaching on justification to be: belittlement of sin, self-praise, righteousness by works, salvation for sale, a church that inserted itself between God and humans. If this is all true, then there is indeed a radical difference of belief. However, one must ask whether the doctrinal differences were exaggerated so as to become irreconcilable, that is, whether the disagreement between the denominations had been accurately understood. For this reason, attempts were already undertaken in the Reformation period to bridge the gaps and come to an understanding of the doctrine of justification (the Regensburg Colloquy in 1541), but these did not succeed. Afterwards nothing happened in this area for centuries until the emergence of the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century. In particular,

the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948 in Amsterdam gave a new impulse that eventually led to the signing of the *JDDJ* in 1999.

The Prehistory of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

Comparative Studies of Individual Theologians From 1949 to 1980

The Heidelberg Lutheran theologian, Peter Brunner, gave a lecture in 1949, in which he acknowledged that the Council of Trent's doctrine of justification, while occasionally formulated in a dangerous manner, was nonetheless in substance acceptable for a Lutheran theologian.¹ In 1957, the Catholic theologian Hans Küng published an investigation into the doctrine of justification according to the Reformed theologian Karl Barth in comparison with that of the Council of Trent.² His conclusion that there was a fundamental agreement between the two caused a sensation. Barth gave him a hypothetical concurrence: If Küng's interpretation correctly states the Council's doctrine, then there are in fact no fundamental differences.

Küng's book gave an important boost to the ecumenical discussion about justification. Various Catholic and Protestant theologians attempted in a similar manner to work out areas of agreement between Catholic and Protestant understandings of justification. On both sides were sceptical voices of those denying the possibility of finding agreement. Yet, in 1980, the debate on justification received a particular boost in connection with the 450th jubilee of the Augsburg Confession, the most important Lutheran Confession. A joint Lutheran-Catholic commentary on the Augsburg Confession concluded that there were important differences between the denominations with regard to the doctrine of justification, in particular in relation to its centrality, but also that these differences must not be such that they divide the churches.³

1. Peter Brunner, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre des Konzils von Trient," in Brunner, *Pro Ecclesia*, vol. 2 (Berlin-Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus Berlin und Hamburg, 1966), 141-169.

2. Hans Küng, *Rechtfertigung. Die Lehre Karl Barths und eine katholische Besinnung. Mit einem Geleitwort von Karl Barth* (Einsiedeln: Piper, 1957). English translation: Hans Küng, *Justification: The doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic reflection. With a letter from Karl Barth* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1964).

3. H. Meyer and H. Schütte, ed., *Confessio Augustana. Bekenntnis des einen Glaubens. Gemeinsame Untersuchung lutherischer und katholischer Theologen* (Paderborn: BonifatiusVerlag, 1980).

After 1980 the situation of the conversations between Protestants and Catholics changed in a significant way. From this time the conversation was no longer determined by the work of individual theologians, but by the results of dialogue commissions assigned with this task. The dialogue on justification thus gained authority and moved towards official declarations by the churches.

Results of the Ecumenical Dialogues From 1972 to 1994

Three different dialogue commissions submitted reports on the theme of justification: an international Lutheran-Roman Catholic commission, a Catholic-Lutheran dialogue commission in the United States, and the Ecumenical Study Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians in Germany.

The International Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue, 1972 and 1994. The international joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission actually submitted two reports that became significant for the dialogue on justification. The first one, which appeared in 1972, is titled *The Gospel and the Church* and is usually referred to as the “Malta Report” after the place of its finalization.⁴ This report states that the message of justification is “an important interpretation of the centre of the gospel” (§27) and that between Catholics and Lutherans “a far-reaching agreement in the understanding of the doctrine of justification appears possible” (§28). In 1994, twenty-two years later, the commission maintained this assertion again in its study, *Church and Justification*.⁵ A consensus in the teaching on justification must, according to the commission, prove itself ecclesologically (§§1-2). In contrast to some prejudicial pronouncements, the report states, “we may not speak of a fundamental conflict or even opposition between justification and the church” (§242).

The Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue in the United States in 1983. The most elaborate presentation of the theme of justification in the framework of the ecumenical dialogues was published in 1983 in the United States under the title *Justification by Faith*.⁶ These dialogues concluded that a “fundamental

4. Harding Meyer *et al.*, eds., *Dokumente wachsender Übereinstimmung*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1991), 248-271 (original Version in German). English text: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/en4.html> .

5. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Information Service 86, 1994, II-III. 128-181.

6. H. George Anderson *et al.*, eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1985).

consensus on the gospel” had been reached (§164), namely “on the nature of trust or assurance of salvation, on the fundamental experiential attitude of the justified in relation to God (*coram deo*). There are, however, remaining differences on theological formulations and on the relation between theology and proclamation” (§157). Regarding these remaining differences, the report states that “Lutherans and Catholics can share in each others’ concerns in regard to justification and can to some degree acknowledge the legitimacy of the contrasting theological perspectives and structures of thought” (§121).

The Study, The Condemnations of the Reformation Era, From Germany in 1986.

The German study, *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?*, compiled in 1986 by the Ecumenical Study Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians, went one step further than the American dialogue.⁷ In contrast to the two commissions mentioned earlier, there were now not only Lutherans on the Protestant side, but also theologians from the Reformed tradition. Likewise in contrast to the other dialogues this one resulted in a wide acknowledgement of the final report from the churches. The study was one of the fruits of the visit to Germany by Pope John Paul II in 1980. Thanks to this visit a Joint Ecumenical Commission came into being under the chairmanship of two bishops who had asked the Ecumenical Study Group of Protestant and Catholic Theologians, active since 1946, to prepare a study. The task was to examine whether the mutual doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century were still valid with regard to the contemporary partner. With this question in mind, the Study Group—under the academic leadership of the Catholic professor (later Cardinal) Karl Lehmann and the Lutheran professor Wolfhart Pannenberg—worked for four years on three themes: justification, sacrament, and ministry, and published its results in 1986. The results related to justification drew the strongest attention.

The methodological principle of the Study Group proved to be particularly pioneering: In order to understand the Protestant and Catholic teachings on justification as being complementary, agreement in the structure of the lines of thought or even the mode of expression was not required; it was only necessary that awareness of the concerns of the other side’s teaching should be recognizable. This was later called the principle of differentiated consensus. The Study Group saw complementarity in the teachings on justification in that the

7. Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *Lehrverurteilungen – kirchentrennend? I. Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute* (Freiburg i.Br. and Göttingen: Herder and Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1986). English translation: Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press 1990).

Protestant teaching particularly underlined the wretchedness of sin, whereas the Catholic teaching emphasized God's power to create anew. For both sides, however, the grave consciousness of sin and the new creation by God belong inseparably together; it is just that the emphases are different. The conclusion of the examination of particular doctrinal differences was that the mutual doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century are no longer valid with respect to the contemporary partner. Typical of the conclusions in almost all of these areas is that "The mutual rejections applied even in the sixteenth century only to indistinct and misleading formulations. They certainly no longer apply to the partner's actual view" (49).

The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide? was presented to the Catholic German Bishops Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*—EKD)⁸—together with the request that church leaderships should "in binding form" express "that the 16th century condemnations no longer apply to today's partner, inasmuch as its doctrine is not determined by the error, which the condemnation wished to avert" (186). This "greatest possible degree of church recognition" (177) was possible and necessary, although "an initial partial, if not as yet complete, consensus" had already been reached (186).

Theological commissions were set up in both churches to examine the study. From the Protestant side arose three extensive expert reports, which were published together as a book.⁹ In the autumn of 1994, all evangelical (i.e., Protestant) Regional Churches in Germany issued a "Common Statement,"¹⁰ saying that a considerable number of doctrinal condemnations were no longer valid. Yet these were only invalid if the interpretations laid down in the document, *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, were also upheld by the Magisterium on the Roman Catholic side.¹¹ This "Common Statement" of all the Protestant Regional Churches was personally handed over to the Pope in Rome on December 18, 1994, by the chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church of Germany.

8. The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) is the union of 20 independent Lutheran, Reformed and United regional churches and is as such the representative body of the main-line Protestant churches in Germany. It is not "evangelical" in the sense of the Evangelical Alliance.

9. *Lehrverurteilungen im Gespräch: Die ersten offiziellen Stellungnahmen aus den evangelischen Kirchen in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1993).

10. *Ökumenische Rundschau* 44, 1995, 99-102.

11. *Loc. cit.*, 100.

The request that *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era* should receive the “greatest possible degree of church recognition”¹² was at least “partially” complied with by the Protestant churches in Germany.¹³ The corresponding confirmation from the Pope’s side, however, failed to materialize. Thus, the ecumenical dialogue did not progress further at this stage.

Joint Declaration 1997–1999: From the Draft Version to the Signing

The Origins of the Joint Declaration

After it had become clear that the results of the study, *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, on the themes of justification, sacraments, and ministry could not be accepted by the Catholic magisterium, the Council of the LWF embraced a new initiative. In January 1995 it sent to its 122 member churches a draft text of a *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, which had been developed in cooperation with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and which aimed to make it possible for the Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church to declare reciprocally that their theological condemnations pertaining to the doctrine of justification were no longer valid. Thus, it had the same aim as *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, with the difference that the new *Joint Declaration* concerned itself exclusively with the area where the two sides were closest, namely with the doctrine of justification (not together with the sacraments and the ministry). In addition, the new *Joint Declaration* moved beyond a German context to an international one.

The prompt reactions from Lutheran churches to this initiative of the LWF¹⁴ made it clear that the draft text would have to be revised if there were to be a consensus among the Lutheran churches. Thereafter, a theological commission was set up by the Pontifical Council for Unity and the General Secretariat of the LWF to address recommended changes. Thus, a second version and then a third version were produced.¹⁵ The third and final version was submitted to the decision boards of the LWF and the responsible organs of the Roman Catholic Church in February 1997, with the request to declare that the

12. Lehmann and Pannenberg, *Condemnations of the Reformation Era*, 177.

13. Ökumenische Rundschau 44, 1995, 100.

14. Friedrich Hauschildt, Udo Hahn, and Andreas Siemens, eds, *Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre: Dokumentation des Entstehungs- und Rezeptionsprozesses* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2009), 23–243 (Chapter A).

15. For documents on the second version see Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, Chapter B, 244–272; for documents on the third and final version, see Chapter C, 273–318.

mutual theological condemnations regarding the doctrine of justification were no longer valid.¹⁶

The Content of the *Joint Declaration*

In its preamble the *JDDJ* states that previous national and international dialogues on the doctrine of justification between Catholics and Lutherans had shown such a high degree of agreement that it was now time to “to take stock and to summarize the results of the dialogues on justification so that our churches may be informed about the overall results of this dialogue with the necessary accuracy and brevity, and thereby be enabled to make binding decisions” (4). The *JDDJ* had the intention of showing that the participating churches were now able to articulate “a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ” (5). Thus, it “shows that the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations” (5). The previous dialogue reports and documents were to be neither replaced nor complemented, but rather summarized.

The first part of the *JDDJ* gathers in a number of paragraphs the biblical message of justification and the second part presents the ecumenical problems of the doctrine of justification. The third part formulates the “common understanding of justification.” Therefore, this is the central part of the declaration. “The common listening to the good news proclaimed in Holy Scripture,” as it says here (15), as well as the theological dialogues of the previous years, had led to a “shared understanding of justification.” This shared understanding encompassed “a consensus in the basic truths” of the doctrine of justification. The remaining “differing explications in particular statements” are “compatible” (*ibid.*) with the consensus on basic truths. The consensus is then formulated in four paragraphs, which the following two sentences concisely summarize:

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. (15)

In the discussion about the *JDDJ*, paragraph 18 in the third part proved to be particularly significant, which states among other things:

16. Text of the final version in Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 273-285; English translation in *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000).

Therefore, the doctrine of justification . . . 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. (16)

The fourth and longest part of the *JDDJ* contains, in keeping with its heading, the “explication of the common understanding of justification.” It is divided into seven sub-parts, which deal with following topics:

1. Human Powerlessness and Sin in Relation to Justification
2. Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous
3. Justification by Faith and through Grace
4. The Justified as Sinner
5. Law and Gospel
6. Assurance of Salvation
7. The Good Works of the Justified

Each of these seven sub-parts is constructed so that the consensus is initially formulated, followed by a section that shows the particular Lutheran and Catholic understandings of the “basic truth” concerned. The “differing explications” (§14) of the consensus are presented here, which are “in their difference open to one another” (§40). The remaining “differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis” which exist notwithstanding the consensus are nevertheless “compatible” (§14) with it, or rather, they are “acceptable” (§40) in light of the consensus. The method used here is the search for a “differentiated consensus.” The consensus is called “differentiated” because it is not an exhaustive one that irons out all differences, but rather allows differing explications when these differences are deemed to be compatible with the consensus.

The fifth and final part of the *JDDJ* deals with “The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached.” Here the authors come to speak of the doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century and explain that “the teaching presented in this declaration” of the Lutheran churches and the Catholic Church respectively do not fall under the condemnations of the sixteenth century (§41). Yet the doctrinal condemnations retain the character of “salutary warnings,” which must be attended to in teaching and practice (§42). Furthermore, the consensus still has to influence and prove itself in the life and teaching of the churches (§43). There are still “questions [which] need further clarification”—among others, the relationship between the Word of God and church doctrine, the doctrine of the Church and the sacraments, and the relationship

between justification and social ethics. The consensus reached in the *Joint Declaration* form a “solid basis” for this further clarification (*ibid.*).

The LWF sent the text of the declaration to its member churches with the question of whether or not they could assent to it. In Germany, this led to what some regarded as the most passionate theological and ecclesiastical dispute in decades.

The Theological Dispute and the Churches in Germany

The Protestant news service (*Evangelischer Pressedienst*—epd) published the immediate dispute over the *JDDJ* in twenty-four issues, from August 1997 to December 1999. The dispute appeared not only in theological journals, but also in the national daily newspapers, above all in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. In view of this multitude of articles, it is not possible to trace the entire progression. I shall limit myself to a few notes.

The dispute erupted in September 1997 as a result of an essay by the Tübingen systematic theologian Eberhard Jüngel.¹⁷ This essay concerned itself only with paragraph 18 of the *JDDJ*, which describes the doctrine of justification as “an indispensable criterion,” but also states that “Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria.” Walter Cardinal Kasper had based this Catholic position on the fact that the Bible uses other terms and images in the matter of justification.¹⁸ Jüngel considered this utterance to be a “belittlement of the criteriological function of the article of justification.” The Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, which is run by the LWF and had already brought out a supporting commentary on the *JDDJ* before the dispute, sent out “a first response to recent criticisms of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*” in October 1997 to some church offices in Germany.¹⁹ In it Jüngel was accused of a wrong use of the term “criterion.”²⁰

The dispute about the evaluation of the *JDDJ* attracted the attention of leading figures and the synods of Lutheran churches in Germany and

17. Eberhard Jüngel, “Um Gottes willen - Klarheit! Kritische Bemerkungen zur Verharmlosung der kriteriologischen Funktion des Rechtfertigungsartikels - aus Anlaß einer ökumenischen ‘Gemeinsamen Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre,’” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 94 (1997, Vol.:3), 394-406.

18. Walter Kasper, “In allem Christus bekennen. Einig in der Rechtfertigungslehre als Mitte und Kriterium des christlichen Glaubens,” *KNA-ÖKI* 32 (August 12, 1997): 5-7.

19. This text and the response as an open letter from Eberhard Jüngel were published in January 1998 in *epd-Dokumentation* No. 1/98.

20. *Ibid.*, 10.

worldwide. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported in detail about this, and in the letters to the editors section there was a storm of criticism directed against the supporters of the *JDDJ*. This prompted Wolfhart Pannenberg to participate in the discussion—also in a letter to the editors in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.²¹ He deplored the fact that the coverage of and commentaries on the controversy portrayed the content of the *JDDJ* as well as the views of the Protestant theologians in a very one-sided manner. The *JDDJ* did not in fact express a consensus in everything, but only in certain central points, which represented “an important ecumenical progress.”²²

This and other defenses of the *JDDJ* prompted theological critics of the *Joint Declaration*, under the leadership of Gerhard Ebeling,²³ to demonstrate by means of a petition how many theology professors rejected the *JDDJ*. In a short time, the total reached 141 signatories, a number which soon rose to over 160. In this “Vote of University Professors on the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*,”²⁴ the signatories declared that a consensus on the basic truths of the doctrine of justification had *not* been reached. Therefore, they summoned the Lutheran churches “to reject the JD in its present form.” Of course not all Protestant theologians were opponents of the *JDDJ*. The Lutheran systematic theologian Hans-Martin Barth from Marburg stated that with the *JDDJ*, Reformation theology had made inroads into “the heart of Catholicism.”²⁵ A report of the Protestant theology faculty of the University of Tübingen, of which Eberhard Jüngel was also a member, recommended to the Württemberg Regional Church a “differentiated endorsement of the *JDDJ*, which unmistakably recognised the reservations against it.”²⁶

21. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (January 21, 1998); documented in *epd-Dokumentation* No. 7/98, 53.

22. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, “Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre aus evangelischer Sicht,” in *Zur Zukunft der Ökumene: Die “Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre,”* eds. Bernd Jochen Hilberath and Wolfhart Pannenberg (Regensburg: F. Pustet 1999), 70-78.

23. Scott A. Celsor, *Word and faith in the formation of Christian personhood coram Deo: Gerhard Ebeling’s rejection of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (New York, Bern, Frankfurt, Berlin, and Vienna: Peter Lang, 2016).

24. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 7/98, 1f; also in Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 492–497.

25. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 7/98, 8.

26. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 15/98, 1-5; also in Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 527-533; citation at 533.

The Resolutions of the Churches and Their Evaluation

The Evaluation Resolution of the LWF of the Middle of June 1998. The council of the LWF requested that its member churches give a response to the *JDDJ* by May 1, 1998, at the latest. They composed an evaluation resolution in Geneva on June 16. The basis for this resolution was an analysis of the responses by the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. As a result, the council of the LWF resolved “to assent to the agreements on the doctrine of justification, as laid down in the *Joint Declaration*”²⁷ and to state that the Lutheran doctrinal condemnations are not applicable to the Catholic doctrine formulated in the *JDDJ*.

The Vatican Response of the End of June 1998 and the Protestant Reaction. On June 25, 1998, the official Catholic response to the text of the *JDDJ* was published in Rome, by common agreement between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity under Edward Cardinal Cassidy.²⁸ A new situation arose through this response, because it did not clearly express agreement. The Vatican confirmed that a consensus had been reached in *many* basic truths of the doctrine of justification, but not in *all*. There remained in fact “a list of points” that “constitute still an obstacle to agreement between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on all the fundamental truths.” This “list of points” was then explicitly stated under the heading, “Clarifications.” According to this list, the Catholic Church has “major difficulties” with the Lutheran formula *simul justus et peccator*. In the Catholic understanding, the concupiscence that remains in the baptised is “not, properly speaking, sin.” There is a further difficulty with the understanding of the doctrine of justification as criterion. For the Catholic Church the “fundamental criterion” is the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith, which is the church’s “confession of the one God in three persons.” With respect to the question of the doctrinal condemnations, this official Catholic response states that the remaining divergencies must be overcome before the Catholic Church could affirm that the condemnations of the Council of Trent no longer apply. Both Vatican offices, which had themselves worked on the formulation of the text of the *JDDJ*, declared now that they were not in agreement with it in substantial areas. This was either ecumenical inconsiderateness or a sign of considerable indecision in Rome.

27. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 27/98, 4; also in Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 806-808.

28. In English at https://web.archive.org/web/20160502211532/https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_01081998_off-answer-catholic_en.html.

The general secretary of the LWF disclosed in a press release that the “basis on which it could be declared that the respective doctrinal condemnations of the time of the Reformation were no longer valid, had become unclear.”²⁹ Despite this, the LWF maintained its assent to the *JDDJ*. On the other hand, the opponents to the *JDDJ* on the Protestant side were satisfied that the Catholic side had largely rejected the declaration. Those on both sides who spoke for a “no” or a “not like that” found themselves united. The criticisms, however, arose for opposite reasons: For the Protestant critics the *JDDJ* was too Catholic, for the Catholic critics it was too Protestant. That speaks rather more *for* the *JDDJ* than *against* it.

The disappointment and partial indignation that the Roman answer evoked from the Protestant side evidently took the Vatican by surprise and soon caused it to send out signals of a *rapprochement*. The first came just three weeks after the Catholic response by means of a letter to the editors in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI.³⁰ In it he expressed his regret that the public opinion had been formed through a “completely one-sided” reading of the Roman response, which “in no way does justice to its real intentions.”³¹ Ratzinger assured his readers that the Vatican agreed with the “consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification”; the “clarifications” were only there to explain which points, in the view of the Catholics, required further discussion. Cardinal Cassidy, the president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, who had subscribed the official Roman response, wrote a letter to the General Secretary of the LWF³² and explained: The Catholic Church had no difficulty in confirming and signing the *JDDJ*. As for the statement that the mutual doctrinal condemnations no longer apply to the present partner, the Catholic Church had responded with neither a “yes” nor a “no,” but had wished for further study.

From the ranks of German theologians, Eberhard Jüngel responded often and at length to the response of the Vatican, and this not polemically, but in a constructive manner: It could by no means be said that the two churches’ process of mutual understanding had failed.³³ Jüngel had from the outset—in spite of all his criticisms—called not for a refusal, but rather for a

29. Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 819f.

30. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 32/98; Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 840f.

31. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 32/98, 3, and Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 840.

32. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 43/98, 19ff; original English in Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 842-845.

33. *epd-Dokumentation* No. 37/98, 28.

continuation of the *JDDJ*. He had not signed the sharp rejection vote of the 160 university professors.

The “Official Common Statement” and its Signing on Reformation Day 1999

Development and Content of the Statement. The efforts of the churches to bring the consensus conversations to a successful conclusion despite the irritations caused by the Catholic response were not carried out by means of theological publications but through private talks in a small group. A group of four Germans—more exactly, four Bavarians—met as a working group, to which also Cardinal Ratzinger belonged on the Catholic side. This working group produced a text which was published in May 1999 by the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church under the heading “Official Common Statement” (OCS).³⁴ With this statement the open questions formulated in the Vatican response to the *JDDJ* were answered in a way that was acceptable to both sides, so that a plan was made to sign the “Official Common Statement” formally and with it also the hotly-disputed *JDDJ* on Reformation Day, October 31, 1999, in Augsburg.

What is the content of the OCS? The text contains three points and an annex, which underlines and supports the arguments of the three points. In point 1, two central paragraphs of the *JDDJ*, namely 40 and 41, are affirmed together. The first paragraph speaks of a “consensus in the basic truths of the doctrine of justification.” In the second paragraph both sides affirm the basis of the achieved consensus, that the mutual doctrinal condemnations of the sixteenth century do not apply to the teaching of the dialogue partner. Point 2 of the OCS draws attention to the queries presented by both sides and refers to the annex. In point 3 both sides obligate themselves to continue the dialogue in order to come to a deepened common understanding of the doctrine of justification. In the course of this dialogue, particular attention was to be paid to the biblical foundations of the doctrine and to a use of language relevant for people today. The further dialogue should aim to reach “full church communion,” which is defined as “a unity in diversity, in which remaining differences would be ‘reconciled’ and no longer have a divisive force.”³⁵ This last formulation is quite remarkable in so far as it takes up almost word-for-word the Protestant model of church unity, namely, “unity in reconciled diversity.” This Protestant objective for ecumenical work is here taken on officially by the Catholic Church for the first time. The main text of the statement concludes by making it

34. English text in *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000), 41-42.

35. *Ibid.*, 42.

unambiguously clear that both dialogue partners accept the *JDDJ* in its entirety. The impression from the Roman response at the end of June 1998, that the Catholic Church only assented to certain portions of the *JDDJ*, is thus overcome.

In the annex to the OCS, the authors clarify why the previous critical queries from the Catholic Church are no longer an obstacle to the signing of the *Joint Declaration*. On the matter of sin in the justified, section 2A of the annex states that justification is not only the forgiveness of sins but also “being made righteous.” According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, whoever is in Christ is “a new creation.” “In this sense” the justified “do *not* remain sinners.”³⁶ With this the Catholic intention is adopted. Subsequently, it is said that “persisting danger” can come from “the power of sin and its action in Christians.” And then follows the conclusion: “To this extent, Lutherans and Catholics can together understand the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*.”³⁷ In view of the fact that the original Roman Catholic response to the *JDDJ* had particular difficulties with the Lutheran formula *simul justus et peccator*, because of which it held that the condemnations of the Tridentine decree had not been made invalid, the common profession in the OCS is a truly significant and at the same time surprising advance.³⁸

In section 2C of the annex, the relationship between grace and human action is discussed and a formula is given, which some had missed in the *JDDJ*, that justification not only occurs “by grace alone” (*sola gratia*), but also “by faith alone” (*sola fide*). This pointed Lutheran emphasis on the rejection of works is pronounced here for the first time by the Catholic Church. This too is a huge and positive surprise. Divine grace and human action are brought together in this statement, so that the working of God’s grace does not exclude human action. On the theme of faith and works, section 2D of the annex states that good works are necessary, so that the justified do not waste the grace given to them but rather live in it. It is also stated that good works are not the basis for justification nor do they merit it. Section 2E declares that by justification we are unconditionally brought into the promise of eternal life, and points too to the future final judgement of works, to which the justified also will be subjected.

36. Ibid., 43.

37. Ibid., 44.

38. Cf. Uwe Swarat, “‘Gerecht und Sünder zugleich’: Die Rechtfertigungslehre Martin Luthers in kritischer Diskussion,” in *Aus Glauben gerecht: Weltweite Wirkung und ökumenische Rezeption der reformatorischen Rechtfertigungslehre*, ed. Oliver Pilnei and Martin Rothkegel (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 9-32; also in U. Swarat, *Gnade und Glaube: Studien zur baptistischen Theologie* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2021), 91-114.

In the conclusion of this underscoring of the consensus reached on the doctrine of justification, the criteriological function of the doctrine of justification is also touched upon (section 3 of the annex). Both sides agree that no teaching may contradict this criterion. On the controversial question of whether there is only this one criterion or several others for the teaching and practice of the churches, the OCS states that this one criterion, namely the doctrine of justification, is not isolated, but has its “truth” and “specific meaning” only within the “overall context of the Church’s fundamental Trinitarian confession of faith.”³⁹

With this “Official Common Statement” in May 1999, all problems relating to the content and formal issues which the Catholic Church had raised in its response to the *JDDJ* less than one year earlier were overcome, and indeed in a way—in my opinion—that comes closer to the concerns of the Lutheran side than the *JDDJ* itself. Through consideration of the reservations of the Catholic Church, the consensus on justification paradoxically obtained a significantly more Protestant flavor.

Critical Evaluations of Procedure and Content. Eberhard Jüngel was delighted with the OCS: “Protestant Christianity has good reason to rejoice over an ecumenical step forward, which not only authoritatively calls for further progress, but also enables it.”⁴⁰ Thus he was transformed from being one of the earliest and sharpest critics of the Catholic-Lutheran agreement on the doctrine of justification to being one of its most persuasive defenders. Other critics of the *JDDJ* stood by their harsh rejection after the publication of the OCS, however. They declared that the texts represented an ecclesiological and theological victory of the Catholic side over the Reformation faith. On October 21, 1999, a new negative “Statement of university theological teachers on the Official Common Statement concerning the *JDDJ*” was published, which was signed by 243 professors.⁴¹ The OCS was reproached for fundamentally putting in question the material statements of the Lutheran teaching on justification. For this reason, they warned against its signing.

On the Catholic side only one theologian objected to the *JDDJ* and the OCS, namely Leo Scheffczyk, professor emeritus for dogmatics and the history of dogma at the University of Munich.⁴² Scheffczyk maintained that it is not

39. *Joint Declaration*, 46-47.

40. *Deutsches Evangelisches Sonntagsblatt*, June 4, 1999.

41. Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 944-949.

42. Leo Scheffczyk, “Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre’ und die Norm des Glaubens,” *Theologisches* 28 (1998), 61–68 (citation at 67), 125-132; Interview with the Catholic newspaper, *Die Tagespost*, July 10, 1999 (*epd-Dokumentation* Nr. 36/99, 9ff); “Der ökumenische Dialog und das bleibend Katholische,” *Theologisches* 30 (2000), 218–230.

possible to differentiate between mutually accepted “fundamental truths” and differing “explications,” because the “so-called explications belong to the substantial elements.” With the *JDDJ* the Catholic Church had recognized the Lutheran doctrine and thereby violated what is permanently Catholic.

Church Resolutions From the Protestant Side. The sharp objections from academic theologians had no decisive influence on church bodies on the Protestant side. On October 11, 1999, the leading bodies of all the Protestant regional churches in Germany (the governing body of the VELKD—United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany—together with the Board of the Arnoldshain Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany—EKD) made it clear that they welcomed the agreement between the Vatican and the LWF.

However, not all Lutheran churches in Germany belong to the EKD. The Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (*Selbständige Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*—SELK) is a Lutheran free church that keeps its distance from the EKD because it does not support church communion between Lutherans and Reformed. The SELK is a sister church, for example, of the Missouri Synod (LCMS) in the United States and of the Igreja Evangélica Luterana do Brasil (IELB). In March 1999, the SELK took a position opposing the *JDDJ*: The fundamental differences accruing from the Reformation Era had not found a truly acceptable solution.⁴³ After the “Official Common Statement” along with its annex had appeared, the SELK took a substantially more positive stance in September 1999. “We acknowledge,” it stated, “that questions, which existed at the time when the *JDDJ* was adopted, have been worked on and have led to a certain consensus.”⁴⁴

The Signing in Augsburg October 31, 1999, and the Pope’s Statement. As planned, the “Official Common Statement” was signed in Augsburg on October 31, 1999, in a moving and ultimately jubilant gathering, as eyewitnesses reported.⁴⁵ Edward Cardinal Cassidy as President of the Pontifical Council for Unity signed on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church, and for the LWF its president, the Regional Bishop of Braunschweig, Dr Christian Krause. The *JDDJ* was not signed directly, but rather the later OCS. This raised some questions concerning matters of church law, as the Lutheran

43. Text of the Statement in Uwe Swarat *et al.*, eds., *Von Gott angenommen – in Christus verwandelt: Die Rechtfertigungslehre im multilateralen ökumenischen Dialog*, Beihefte zur Ökumenischen Rundschau 78, (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck 2006), 112-119.

44. Text of the Statement in *ibid.*, 120-124; citation at 120.

45. “The signing celebration : the joint declaration on the doctrine of justification ” (Augsburg 1999), in Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 997-1045.

churches had conducted their deliberations and resolutions on the basis of the *JDDJ* and not the OCS. One might question whether the individual Lutheran churches are at all bound by their World Federation's signing of the document. With regard to the historical impact of the signing for ecumenical rapprochement, these questions of church law have proven to be secondary.

On the day of the signing Pope John Paul II also issued a statement in Rome concerning the event.⁴⁶ He declared it to be a "milestone on the not always easy way to the restoration of full communion among Christians." The document establishes a sound foundation for further ecumenical theological research and is a valuable contribution to the cleansing of historical memory and to common witness.

The Reaction in the German Protestant Free Churches

How did the non-Lutheran Protestant free churches in Germany react to the Lutheran-Catholic agreement on the doctrine of justification?⁴⁷ The members of the United Methodist Church in Germany (*Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche*—EmK) expressed themselves most frequently and with the greatest emphasis. This is no surprise, when we bear in mind that through the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (which is now the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe—CPCE) they have close connections to the Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches in Europe. The then bishop of the Methodists in Germany, Walter Klaiber, made several statements and called for abandoning the traditional polemical theological terms and categories, and for taking up the findings of New Testament exegesis. By this means it should be possible to bridge denominational divides and to promote the communication of the message of justification to people today.⁴⁸

The Methodist dogmatician Geoffrey Wainwright from the United States gave a Methodist commentary on the *Joint Declaration* in two guest lectures in Germany in 1998.⁴⁹ In these he explained that he was not able to affirm either the Lutheran or the Catholic doctrine of justification in its entirety, but that as a Methodist he was a "floating voter" between the two teachings. He

46. Hauschildt, *Gemeinsame Erklärung*, 1046f.

47. Compare Johannes Demandt, "Die Bedeutung der Gemeinsamen Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre für das ökumenische Engagement der Freikirchen," *Una Sancta* 59 (2004), 159-170.

48. Compare his retrospect of 2008: Walter Klaiber, "Der ökumenische Dialogprozess zur Rechtfertigungslehre," *Theologisches Gespräch* 32 (2008), 55-72.

49. Geoffrey Wainwright, "Rechtfertigung: lutherisch oder katholisch? Überlegungen eines methodistischen Wechselwählers," *Kerygma und Dogma* 45 (1999), 182-206.

considered the *Joint Declaration* to be an “acceptable consensus,” “to which the Methodists could also agree.”⁵⁰ With regard to some interpretations of the Lutheran doctrine of justification he stated his reservation that faith was labelled “purely passive” and “non-active,” that it was no longer possible to describe it in a positive manner and that it results in a justification “without faith.” In contrast, Methodists counted on an “active receiving” of justifying grace.⁵¹

The World Council of Methodist Churches entered into exploratory talks with the Lutherans and the Catholics in 2001 in order to clarify, if and in which form the Methodists could agree to the *JDDJ*. These talks were concluded in July 2006 with the signing of an “Official Common Affirmation” of the *JDDJ* by all three World Communions in Seoul (South Korea). I shall dwell on this in the next section.

After the Methodists, the Baptists in Germany have grappled most with the *Joint Declaration*. From their ranks, there are not only comments on the *JDDJ* from individual theologians,⁵² but there is also a pronouncement from a leading body, the Board of the Union. At its first meeting after the signing at Augsburg, in November 1999, the Board wrote an open letter to the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church, in which it thanked both churches for their “courage” and “resoluteness” in “repealing the mutual condemnations and making room for the fraternal spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ in their Churches.” The dialogue process that had been concluded in Augsburg was seen as a great step forward in the ongoing endeavor for the unity of the body of Christ and for living our common hope in the spirit of reconciled diversity.⁵³ As far as I

50. *Ibid.*, 205.

51. *Ibid.*, 187.

52. Uwe Swarat, “Verständigung vorerst gescheitert Der Dialog um die Rechtfertigungslehre zwischen Katholiken und Lutheranern,” in *Die Gemeinde, Das Magazin des Bundes Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden*, Nr. 17 (1998), 14f; also printed in *epd-Dokumentation* No. 51 (1998): 51f; Eduard Schütz, “Versöhnung inklusive Rechtfertigung: Zum römisch-katholisch/lutherischen Gespräch über die Rechtfertigungslehre,” in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Gemeinde* 4 (1999), 121-137; “Noch einmal: Versöhnung inklusive Rechtfertigung,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Gemeinde* 5 (2000), 134-144; Andrea Strübind, “Ungeteilte Freude?” *Die Gemeinde* 1 (2000): 29-31; Dietmar Lütz, “Betroffene Bemerkungen eines Nichtbetroffenen. Die Gemeinsame Erklärung aus der Perspektive eines freikirchlichen Zaungastes,” in *Ökumenisch-Missionarisches Institut des Oekumenischen Rates Berlin-Brandenburg, ed., Rechtfertigung kontrovers: Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre im Gespräch der Konfessionen* (Berlin: WDL-Verlag 2000), 76-87.

53. The text is documented in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Gemeinde* 5 (2000), 184f.

know, this declaration from Germany is the only public utterance by the leadership of a Baptist union concerning this event.

Mention should be made as well of papers given by a Polish and an Estonian Baptist on the *JDDJ*, which were presented during an ecumenical meeting between the BWA and the Pontifical Council on Unity in the Vatican, December 2003. The Polish Baptist theologian Tadeusz J. Zielinski⁵⁴ states that Baptists could agree with the fundamental consensus on the basic truths of the doctrine of justification as formulated in the *JDDJ*, but strikingly presented the Baptist understanding of justification in such a manner that it could hardly be distinguished from the Lutheran one. He maintains that for Baptists too the justification of the ungodly is the leading explication of the gospel message and that in those places where Lutherans and Catholics formulate their remaining differences, the Baptists identify themselves substantially with the Lutheran perspectives. At the same event in 2003 the Estonian theologian Tarmo Toom presented a paper on the question: "Can we join the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*?"⁵⁵ This does not simply present the views of the author himself, but is compiled from representative sources, namely two English confessions of faith from the early period of the Baptist Movement⁵⁶ and two dialogue documents between Baptists and Catholics.⁵⁷ Toom does not give a clear answer to his main question, whether Baptists can enter into agreement with the *JDDJ*, but he does demonstrate important areas of agreement between Baptists and Roman Catholics in soteriology. Both authors, Zielinski and Toom, consider the sacramental understanding of baptism, in particular of infant baptism, to be the most difficult point for Baptists.

From the ranks of the Mennonites in Germany one theological response has been published.⁵⁸ The author states that the Mennonites are closer to the Catholic position than to the Lutheran position, for example in the affirmation of the necessary human consent to God's justifying action, and also in that the doctrine of justification is not the only criterion for teaching and living, but one

54. His paper was given in English but has only been published in a German translation: Tadeusz J. Zielinski, "Christus selbst ist unsere Gerechtigkeit: Eine baptistische Bewertung der GER," *Theologisches Gespräch* 8 (2005), 47-57.

55. Tarmo Toom, "Baptists on Justification: Can We Join the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*?" *Pro Ecclesia* 13/3 (Summer 2004), 289-306.

56. The Second London Confession (1677/1688) and An Orthodox Creed (1678).

57. "Summary Statement of the Second Triennium in the Dialogue between Southern Baptists and Roman Catholic Scholars (1982-1984)" and "Summons to Witness to Christ in Today's World. The Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversations 1984-1988."

58. Rainer W. Burkart, "Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre aus mennonitischer Sicht," *Una Sancta* 55 (2000), 216-218.

among many. All in all he considers that the binding obligation to following Christ is somewhat neglected in the *Joint Declaration*.

So much for the overview of the free-church reactions to the agreement between Lutherans and Catholics in the doctrine of justification.

The Impact of the *Joint Declaration*

What has happened in the ecumenical dialogue on justification since Augsburg 1999?

Ecumenical Dialogues with Baptist Participation

In February 2002, a two-day symposium took place in Paderborn with representatives of the Catholic Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institute for Ecumenics and the Association of Evangelical Free Churches (*Vereinigung evangelischer Freikirchen*—VEF). Thereby a broad theological consensus was ascertained, but some still-open questions were also identified.⁵⁹

In 2006, an ecumenical study on the subject of justification appeared in Germany, authored by the German Ecumenical Study Commission (*Deutscher Ökumenischer Studienausschuss*—DOESTA), the theological commission of the Council of Churches in Germany (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft christlicher Kirchen in Deutschland*—ACK). The special feature of this commission is the great extent to which various Christian traditions are represented in it. Not only do theologians of the Protestant Regional Churches and the Roman Catholic Church belong to DOESTA, but also those of the Old Catholic, Old Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Baptist, and Orthodox Churches. This commission had set out—in a study program lasting three years—to understand the differing approaches in the represented traditions to the subject of justification and salvation and to the *JDDJ*, and to place these in relationship to one another. Furthermore, it turned to two tasks, which had been named in the “Official Common Statement” as areas in which a continuation and deepening of the ecumenical conversation appeared to be particularly urgent: the study of the biblical foundations of the doctrine of justification and the interpretation of the message of justification in language relevant for people

59. All the papers presented at this conference (including one from me) have been published in Walter Klaiber and Wolfgang Thönissen, eds., *Rechtfertigung in freikirchlicher und römisch-katholischer Sicht* (Paderborn: Bonifatius Verlag 2003).

today. The results were published in 2006 in a survey⁶⁰ that has been translated into English and published in 2008 under the title, *Accepted by God—Transformed by Christ: The Doctrine of Justification in Multilateral Ecumenical Dialogue*.⁶¹ Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the *JDDJ*, the DOESTA gave an appreciative statement on the impact of the *JDDJ* under the heading “Jesus Christ is our righteousness, our sanctification and our salvation,”⁶² which has been included in a collection of essays edited by the DOESTA chairpersons, Bernd Oberdorfer and Thomas Söding.⁶³

Ecumenical Conversations Without Baptist Participation

The World Methodist Council “Statement of Association,” 2006. At an international level, the first important step in the direction of broadening the consensus on the doctrine of justification beyond Lutherans and Catholics was prepared in 2001. The Roman Catholic Church and the LWF invited the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council to a consultation, in which they examined whether and how far these two world communions could associate themselves with the joint Catholic-Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of justification. The Methodist representatives reacted very positively, the Reformed with some reservation.

In the following period, concrete conversations were held with the World Methodist Council. This resulted in the Methodists officially agreeing with the *JDDJ* on July 23, 2006, in Seoul. The Methodists did not simply sign the *JDDJ*, because they had no part in the conflict between the Lutherans and the Catholics, which the *JDDJ* arbitrated. Instead, the Methodists formulated their own “Statement of Association” with the *JDDJ*, in which they

60. Johannes Oeldemann, Dagmar Heller and Uwe Swarat, eds., *Von Gott angenommen – in Christus verwandelt. Die Rechtfertigungslehre im multilateralen ökumenischen Dialog*. Beiheft zur Ökumenischen Rundschau, 78. (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck 2006), including Uwe Swarat, *Das baptistische Verständnis von Rechtfertigung und die „Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre“ von Lutheranern und Katholiken*, 177-197.

61. *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: LWF Department for Theology and Studies 2008).

62. English version: https://www.oekumene-ack.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Texte_und_Publikationen/ENGL_2019-09-18_20_Jahre_GER.pdf.

63. Bernd Oberdorfer and Thomas Söding, eds., *Wachsende Zustimmung und offene Fragen. Die Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre im Licht ihrer Wirkung. Quaestiones Disputatae*; 302 (Freiburg i.Br. Herder 2019).

stated their own emphases in understanding the doctrine of justification.⁶⁴ Then the Methodists announced that the understanding of justification, as set out in paragraphs 15–17 of the *JDDJ*, corresponds to the Methodist teaching. The Methodists likewise concurred with the paragraphs in which Catholics and Lutherans formulate their common convictions pertaining to the particular points at issue accruing from the Reformation era; indeed, the Methodists even take on the explanations that the Catholics and Lutherans expressed on these points from their differing perspectives. For the Methodists the discernible differences in emphasis are not a cause for divisions between Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists. In order to show this, the Methodists presented their own teaching on all points in which there were “remaining differences” between Lutherans and Catholics and included them in the consensus on basic truths of the doctrine of justification. In an “Official Common Affirmation” of all three communions, that is of Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists, the consensus is mutually affirmed. The three partners committed themselves to deepen the common understanding of the doctrine of justification in theological study, in teaching and preaching. The conclusion states: “The present achievement and commitment are viewed by Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists as part of their pursuit of the full communion and common witness to the world which is the will of Christ for all Christians.”⁶⁵

The 10-year jubilee of the *JDDJ* in Augsburg 2009 could already be celebrated in a threesome, with Eberhard Jüngel (Lutheran), Karl Cardinal Lehmann (Roman-Catholic), and Walter Klaiber (Methodist) as keynote speakers.⁶⁶

Study on the Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification, 2012. An important ecumenical follow-up to the *JDDJ* was worked on from 2008 until 2011, namely a study on the biblical foundations of the doctrine of justification. The biblical message on justification had already been presented in the *JDDJ*, admittedly very briefly, in paragraphs 8–12. In the “Official Common Statement,” both dialogue partners committed themselves to continue and

64. “Methodist Statement of Association with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and Official Common Statement. The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity,” *Information Service* No. 122 (2006/ii), 55-58. Also available in *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. 20th Anniversary Edition*, https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2021/documents/joint_declaration_2019_en.pdf, 35-41.

65. *20th Anniversary Edition*, 41.

66. See Lutheran World Federation / Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, eds., *10 Years Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*. Documentation of the Jubilee Year Celebration in Augsburg 2009 (Paderborn: Bonifatius Verlag, and Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck Verlag 2011).

deepen the study of the biblical foundations for the doctrine of justification. For this reason, the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Unity developed the plan to set up a group of exegetes to work on this theme. Since the Methodists had in the meantime affirmed the *JDDJ*, they were also invited to participate, as well as the WCRC, which had until that time treated the *JDDJ* with some reserve. As the Reformed Communion surprisingly agreed, a group of delegates from these four Christian world communions came together and drafted a study that appeared in book form in 2012 in both English and German.⁶⁷ This study is not a biblical commentary on the *JDDJ* but an independent exegetical investigation. It aims to show that the consensus reached in the doctrine of justification was not achieved by means of compromises in formulation, from which each party could read out its own particular understanding. The consensus on the doctrine of justification was rather made possible and was finally unavoidable because the exegetical research “had opened up a new and wider horizon for an understanding of scriptural ways of speaking of justification, in whose framework the different accentuations of the traditional formulations of the doctrine of justification could be correlated and integrated into a common understanding, without thereby causing the fundamental statements of the Reformation doctrine of justification to lose their significance and force.”⁶⁸

Affirmation by the Anglican Communion, 2016/2017. When the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC) met in Lusaka, Zambia, in April 2016, it passed a resolution on the *JDDJ*, in which it “welcomes and affirms the substance of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.”⁶⁹ The resolution commemorates that Anglicans and Lutherans share a common understanding of God’s justifying grace, as the Helsinki Report of 1982 stated, and that the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church agree on the essential aspects of the doctrine of salvation, as the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) argued in 1986. The resolution in Lusaka on the *JDDJ* is particularly important, as the ACC is the most representative body of the Anglican Communion. On October 31, 2017, 500 years after

67. *The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification: An Ecumenical Follow-Up to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012). German Translation: *Biblische Grundlagen der Rechtfertigungslehre. Eine ökumenische Studie zur Gemeinsamen Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre*, ed. Walter Klaiber, (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, and Paderborn: Bonifatius Verlag 2012).

68. So Walter Klaiber, in the name of the working group in the preface to the German edition, 10-11.

69. *20th Anniversary Edition*, 43.

the publication of Luther's 95 theses, at a service in Westminster Abbey Archbishop Justin Welby presented the ACC resolution to leaders of the Roman Catholic Church and the LWF.⁷⁰ Canon Dr John Gibaut commented: "During the historic 2017 anniversary, Anglicans rejoice in the extraordinary achievement that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification represents as a sign of healing after 500 years of division."⁷¹

Association of the WCRC, 2017. When the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, now merged into the WCRC, was invited by Catholics and Lutherans in 2001 to join in the *JDDJ*, its representatives hesitated. However, the Reformed churches were induced to speak extensively among themselves about the subject of justification and staged a number of regional consultations. The result of these conversations was that the WCRC at their General Council in 2017 at Leipzig issued a detailed theological statement in which they agreed to the consensus formulated in the *JDDJ*.⁷² They welcomed the distinctive insights of the *JDDJ* and indicated particular emphases and additional insights that Reformed Christians could contribute to the conversation. Among these is reckoned the fact that justification and justice belong together. In an "Official Common Affirmation," Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists together welcomed the Reformed statement. This affirmation was formally signed by all concerned in the town church of Wittenberg, in which Luther had regularly preached, on July 5, 2017, in the 500th year after Luther's 95 Theses.⁷³

The Notre Dame Consultation, 2019. On the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the *JDDJ*, the now five partners in the declaration gathered together at the end of March 2019 at Notre Dame University in Indiana (United States) and issued a statement. In this they reasserted the basic truths of the doctrine of justification that are formulated in the *Joint Declaration*, "emphasizing that the message of God's grace is powerful and urgently needed in our time."⁷⁴ The participants at the conference agreed on further steps in the direction of visible unity; among these they desired to display a common witness in

70. <https://www.anglicannews.org/news/2017/10/archbishop-welby-to-present-acc-reformation-resolution-to-catholic-and-lutheran-leaders.aspx> (retrieved on May 17, 2021).

71. *Ibid.*

72. "Association of the World Communion of Reformed Churches with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," in *20th Anniversary Edition*, 45-53. German, French and Spanish: <http://wrcr.ch/jddj>.

73. <http://wrcr.ch/news/wcrc-joins-declaration-to-overcome-reformation-divisions> (retrieved on May 21, 2021).

74. *20th Anniversary Edition*, 55-58; citation at 56.

church services and in service to others. After a period of three years, that is, in 2022, they wished to reconvene in order to examine progress in this matter.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning, the *JDDJ* is the most significant result of ecumenical dialogues since the formation of the ecumenical movement. It has been shown that patient and sympathetically conducted dialogues can be truly successful, indeed so successful that church leaderships can also be persuaded, and that in the meantime not less than five Christian world communions have officially taken positions supporting the theological consensus. Nothing like this has occurred with any other theological dispute. The doctrine of justification is anything but a side issue, for it is a question pertaining to the center of Christian doctrine, namely soteriology. Admittedly, in the New Testament and also in the Baptist tradition the content of the doctrine of justification is often described using terms other than “justification”: for example, redemption, salvation, reconciliation, forgiveness of sins, adoption as children of God, conversion, new birth, new life, decision for Christ, and coming to faith. Nevertheless, the term “justification” is deeply rooted in the Old as well as the New Testament. The great spiritual reawakening of the Reformation moved precisely this term into the center of theology. On account of this central doctrinal theme, the churches of the sixteenth century divided. For this reason, it is wonderful that it is in the doctrine of justification that such a broad ecumenical consensus could now be reached.

Concerning the content of the *JDDJ*, as a Baptist I too can share in the consensus on the basic truths of the doctrine of justification that it sets out. The central clause of the consensus states: “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” (§15). The *sola gratia*, which was so important for the Reformation with regard to salvation from sin, is confessed together. At the same time, our salvation occurs “in faith in Christ’s saving work,” as it is expressed here, or *sola fide*, “by faith alone,” as it is put in the annex of the OCS (section 2C). It is put on record that the gracious acceptance by God is at the same time our renewal through the Holy Spirit and that good works grow out of faith. Likewise, the confession of the Trinity is linked to it, because justification is “the work of the triune God” (§15). The *JDDJ* correctly emphasizes “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” (§17).

Of particular importance is the statement in the *JDDJ* that the doctrine of justification 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” (§18). The doctrine of justification is in a certain sense a lynchpin of all the truths of the faith, by which they are set in internal relationship to one another. This is not an arbitrary promotion of one particular doctrine, but is substantively necessary. The doctrine of justification will in fact, as the *JDDJ* states, orient the whole of teaching and practice unceasingly toward Christ. This is its decisive function and is why it contains a relentless impulse to reform the church. If we take the doctrine of justification as stated in the *JDDJ* seriously, then the church cannot remain self-sufficient, but must continuously question itself critically and accept being questioned by ecumenical partners.

The method used in the *JDDJ*, the presentation of a differentiated or differentiating consensus, may be regarded as exemplary for ecumenical dialogues. The significance of this method is described in the statement of the Notre Dame Consultation as follows:

We have found that the method of the differentiating consensus has proved to be a fruitful means of overcoming controversies by identifying common substance and distinguishing from its different confessional expressions. Thus this type of consensus encompasses both agreements and differences. It is a creative way to deal with past, present and future complexities, holding together differing perspectives without reducing them to one perspective. We are convinced that we should apply this method to other controversial questions within and between the churches but also to conflicts in the wider society.⁷⁵

Baptists are of course especially interested in the understanding of baptism that is expressed in the *JDDJ*. They could not agree with any document that would maintain that justification is already bestowed by means of infant baptism and not only through faith. As the *JDDJ* only mentions baptism in a couple of places, without describing very precisely its importance for justification, we need not place this point in the evaluation of the *JDDJ* in the foreground. What the *JDDJ* says of baptism is, in my opinion, only problematic if we read it as if the authors meant it in the sense of infant baptism. However, if we read these parts as Baptists, and thus understand by baptism the baptism of believers, then there is no reason to object to the statements.

75. *20th Anniversary Edition*, 56-57.

It is quite possible to understand them to conform to the Baptist teaching on baptism of believers. Baptists do not attribute any faith-creating significance to baptism, but rather baptism *confirms*, *assures*, and *seals* the faith of the believer. This is in broad agreement with the conventional Reformed understanding of baptism, as it is developed, for example, in the Heidelberg Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that justifying faith is “worked” by the preaching of the gospel, and “confirmed” by the use of the sacraments (Question 65). In baptism, the one being baptised is “admonished and assured” that the gospel is of advantage to him (Question 69). The “external baptism with water” is not “the washing away of sin itself,” but is instead a “divine pledge and sign” of the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit (Questions 72 and 73). As the wording of the *JDDJ* leaves room for a sacramental understanding of this kind and as the Reformed Church did not take any offence to the baptismal theology in the *JDDJ*, I believe that Baptists too can agree with it.

Finally, I hope that the Baptist World Alliance decides in the not-too-distant future to assent to the consensus in the doctrine of justification, as set down in the *JDDJ*, and that it participates in the efforts of the five worldwide partners of the *JDDJ* in witnessing together to Christ in word and deed in compliance with the message of justification.

Author biography

Uwe Swarat is a Baptist theologian who received his doctorate in theology from the University of Erlangen in 1988, when he also joined the faculty of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Hamburg, teaching Systematic Theology and the History of Doctrine.