

The World Methodist Council and the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

At its Hong Kong meeting in September 1999, the executive committee of the World Methodist Council (WMC) expressed its joy at the achievement by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman Catholic Church of their Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) and resolved to congratulate the two partners on the impending signing of their agreement. Dr. Joe Hale, then general secretary of the WMC, represented the WMC at the solemn ceremony that took place in Augsburg on October 31, 1999, and brought the letter of congratulation. The Hong Kong meeting also resolved to explore with the LWF and the Catholic Church the possibility for the WMC and its member churches to become officially associated with their doctrinal agreement in the matter of justification – a neuralgic point of difference in Western Christendom since the sixteenth century.

All these actions were reported and confirmed at the full meeting of the WMC in Brighton in July 2001. Meanwhile, the LWF and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity jointly invited the World Methodist Council, together with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), to enter a process whereby they also might come to join in the achievement concerning the doctrine of justification. Accordingly, a consultation was held in Columbus, Ohio, in November 2001 among representatives of the WMC, the WARC, the LWF and the Catholic Church. At that consultation it became clear that good prospects existed for an association between Methodists and the JDDJ.

This was reported to the WMC officers' meeting in March 2002, which charged Bishop Walter Klaiber and Professor Geoffrey Wainwright with drafting a Methodist Statement of Association. This work was helped by discussion in the standing committee on dialogues and ecumenism at the Oslo meeting of the WMC executive committee in September 2002. All along, close consultation took place with the Lutheran and Catholic bodies, as had been recommended by the Columbus meeting. Regular reports were made to the WMC officers' meeting, which gave strong encouragement to the project throughout. The Methodist Statement sets out Methodist teaching on justification in a clear and positive way, while being able to declare and demonstrate its consonance with the JDDJ. The Statement was twice circulated to all member churches of the WMC and met with very positive, even enthusiastic endorsement, in all the responses received at WMC headquarters in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina.

On Tuesday July 18, 2006, the World Methodist Council, meeting in Seoul, Korea, voted unanimously to approve the Methodist Statement of Association with the JDDJ and authorize the signing of the Official Common Affirmation by its representative officers.

Geoffrey Wainwright

METHODIST STATEMENT OF ASSOCIATION WITH THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

1. After official approval of the Lutheran World Federation and of the Roman Catholic Church, the “Official Common Statement by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church” was signed by the two partners on 31 October 1999, thereby confirming the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification”. Articulating their common understanding of basic truths of the doctrine of justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ, this substantial agreement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans expresses a far reaching consensus in regard to the theological controversy which was a major cause of the split in Western churches in the sixteenth century.
2. We, the Churches joined together in the World Methodist Council, welcome this agreement with great joy. We declare that the common understanding of justification as it is outlined in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ 15-17) corresponds to Methodist doctrine. We are especially grateful for the trinitarian approach by which God’s work in salvation is explained in these paragraphs:
 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.
3. We agree also with what Lutherans and Roman Catholics say together about some of the crucial issues in the doctrine of justification which were disputed between them since the time of Reformation (cf. JDDJ 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 37). Moreover, we accept the explanations which Lutherans and Catholics respectively give in paragraphs 20-21, 23-24, 26-27, 29-30, 32-33, 35-36, and 38-39 concerning their respective positions on these issues, and we do not consider these diverse emphases sufficient cause for division between either party and Methodists.
4. The Methodist Movement has always understood itself as deeply indebted to the biblical teaching on justification as it was understood by Luther and the other reformers and then again by the Wesleys. But it has also always embraced elements of the doctrine of justification which belong to the Catholic tradition of the early church both East and West. This gave its own doctrine of justification its distinctive profile. Set in relation to “the remaining differences of language, theological elaboration, and emphasis” which

are not reckoned to impair the “consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification” between Lutherans and Catholics (JDDJ 40), the Methodist teaching may be described thus:

According to John Wesley the doctrine of original sin is an essential Christian doctrine. The corruption of human nature cannot be cured by ourselves. The destructive effects of the Fall are countered by the universal availability of prevenient grace (Sermon 85, On Working Out Our Own Salvation, III.4). That people are able to respond to God’s call is due only to God’s prior work. According to Wesley, the grace of God “assists” but does not “force” the human response (Sermon 63, The General Spread of the Gospel, 11). By God’s grace believers are commissioned and empowered to tell people that God has reconciled the world to himself and to entreat them on behalf of Jesus Christ to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

The deep connection between forgiveness of sins and making righteous, between justification and sanctification, has always been crucial for the Methodist understanding of the biblical doctrine of justification. John Wesley saw in salvation a twofold action of God’s grace: “By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin and restored to the favor of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, restored to the image of God” (Sermon 85, II.1). The redemptive acceptance into communion with God and the creative renewal of our lives are entirely the work of God’s grace.

Salvation “depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace” (Romans 4:16) – this Pauline phrase could well be the motto of the Methodist movement. It started as a missionary movement after the Wesley brothers and their friends experienced the liberating Gospel of salvation by faith alone. It is only through God’s grace that human beings are saved by faith alone. By faith we commit ourselves to the saving, redeeming, healing and renewing work of God’s grace and love in our lives. Therefore genuine Christian faith is always “faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). Neither faith nor love are the achievement of human efforts, but by God’s call to faith and by the outpouring of God’s love we as human beings are included in the reality of God’s salvation.

In Methodist teaching, preaching, liturgy and hymnody, a theology of grace includes not only the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins but also the promise that we are liberated from the power of sin. Methodist theology has tried to take seriously Paul’s assertion: “Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Romans 6:22). This was the reason why Wesley developed the doctrine of “Christian perfection” or “entire sanctification” (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:23), which he considered to be at the heart of Methodist teaching. This doctrine found different interpretations during the history of the Methodist movement. However, in Methodist teaching five things always remained clear:

- a) “Entire sanctification” or “Christian perfection” is nothing else than “loving God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind” and “your neighbour as yourself” (cf. Matthew 22:37-39; 1 John 2:5).
- b) “Christian perfection” is not the absolute perfection which belongs to God alone; and it “does not imply an exemption either from ignorance, or mistake, or infirmities, or temptations” (Wesley’s Sermon 40, Christian Perfection, I.9).
- c) Even if our whole being is filled with the love of God which has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), this will always remain God’s gift and the work of God’s grace and never our human merit or achievement.

- d) The hope of conquering sin should never lead us to deny or disregard the danger of backsliding and being caught by the power of sin. Thus 1 John 1:6-9 states: "If we say that we have fellowship with God while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
- e) Those who are justified and sanctified by God's grace will struggle with temptation and sin during their whole lives. But in this struggle they are strengthened by the promise of the gospel that in Christ God has broken the power of sin. Even if "the contradiction to God within the selfish desires of the old Adam" (JDDJ 28) remains in the lives of the justified, God's grace "reigns through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:21).

For Methodists both the law and the gospel are expressions of God's word and God's will. For guidance in the way of life and good (cf. Deuteronomy 30:15-20), God in his love gave the law, which is summarized in the commandment to love God and our neighbours. As human beings we are not able to follow this way on our own. Because we have all failed to do God's will, the law now serves to accuse and convict us of sin (cf. Romans 3:21). God saves us and gives us life through the love revealed and expressed in the life and the death of Jesus Christ. Although the law no longer has any power to condemn those who believe in Jesus Christ, it remains as summarized in the love commandment an indispensable guide to God's will.

Assurance of faith and assurance of salvation have always belonged to the core of Methodist preaching. Such assurance is not seen as the certainty of possession but as the reliability of a relationship which is founded in God's love. This relationship is lived by using the "means of grace", especially searching the Scriptures and receiving the Lord's Supper. These are outward signs, ordained by God, through which he conveys his grace to us. To be assured by the witness of the Holy Spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:16) is the source of peace and joy in the lives of those who come to believe in Jesus Christ. In Wesleyan terminology, both "holiness" and "happiness" are gifts of God's grace.

"Faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6) is seen as the root of all good which results from the lives of those who believe in Jesus Christ. Works of piety and works of mercy are fruits of the Spirit in the lives of those who follow Jesus. Such works also help the believers to live their lives in communion with God and to be "co-workers with God" (1 Corinthians 3:7) in the field of God's mission and in ministry to the poor and to those who need the love of God most. But all such works are the work of God's grace; or, as John Wesley in his sermon on "Working Out Our Own Salvation" (Philippians 2:12) puts it: "God works, therefore you *can* work. God works, therefore you *must* work" (Sermon 85, III. 2).

5. As Methodists we are grateful that on the basis of such an agreement as this, Lutheran and Methodist Churches in some countries have recognized one another as belonging to the one Church of Jesus Christ and have declared full communion of pulpit and altar. It is our deep hope that in the near future we shall also be able to enter into closer relationship with Lutherans in other places and with the Roman Catholic Church in accordance with this declaration of our common understanding of the doctrine of justification.

OFFICIAL COMMON AFFIRMATION

In this Statement the World Methodist Council and its member churches affirm their fundamental doctrinal agreement with the teaching expressed in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* signed at Augsburg on 31 October 1999 on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church.

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

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

The present achievement and commitment are viewed by Catholics, Lutherans 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.

The Official Common Affirmation of the Methodist Statement of Association with the JDDJ was signed by the three partners at the meeting of the World Methodist Council and Conference in Seoul, Korea, on Sunday July 23, 2006. For the Methodists: Prelate Sunday Mbang and Dr. George Freeman, chair and general secretary, respectively, of the WMC; for the Catholics, Cardinal Walter Kasper and Cardinal Soo-hwan Kim; for the Lutherans, Dr. Ishmael Noko and the Rev. Sven Oppegaard. The signing was greeted by a standing ovation and the spontaneous singing of the doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise him all creatures here below. Praise him above, ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."