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**Reflections on Current Trends in Interchurch Relations:
The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification¹**

Introduction

A major development is currently unfolding in the world of Christianity: a doctrinal rapprochement, not on peripheral beliefs, but on what happens to be the core doctrine of the Reformation movement. It is about the doctrine of justification.

The doctrine of justification was of central importance for the Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century. It was held to be the "first and chief article" and, at the same time, the "ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines."

If, therefore, Christian churches agree on this one doctrine, it becomes a major step towards Christian unity or perhaps even a "union of churches."

Seventh-day Adventists encourage endeavors that foster peace, understanding, and respect in light of the imperative of freedom conscience and religious freedom. A search for unity is certainly a response to the prayer of Jesus in John 17. It is also a sign of efforts to overcome bigotry, discrimination, and criminalizing of others. The hostility that divided Christians, especially since the Reformation, resulted in wars between Christians—a scandal of history that must not be forgotten. Followers of Jesus must be peacemakers. This does not mean superficial doctrinal agreement, but genuine acceptance of the dignity of difference in the framework of freedom of conscience or belief.

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I. The Current Near Consensus

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) did not just develop overnight. The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, represented by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, first signed the document in 1999 after about 35 years of bilateral dialogue. This conversation between Catholics and Lutherans began right after the Second Vatican Council.

A. Signatories to the JDDJ

Since 1999, other communions have entered the ecumenical dialogue and have also signed the Declaration.

The World Methodist Council formally endorsed the Catholic-Lutheran accord in 2006. The World Communion of Reformed Churches—the largest body of Reformed churches in the world, representing 80 million members of Congregational, Presbyterian, Reformed, United, Uniting, and Waldensian churches—signed the JDDJ on July 5, 2017, during a special ceremony in Wittenberg, Germany. The Anglican Communion is expected to do the same later this year.

B. Statement of the Issue

In the 16th century, opposing interpretations and applications of the biblical messages on justification were the root cause of the division of the Western church, and those on each side of the conflict issued doctrinal condemnations of divergent views.

C. Purpose of the Joint Declaration

A shared understanding of justification is fundamental and indispensable to overcoming the division that characterizes world Christianity and ecclesiastical condemnations. As stated in the Preamble of the JDDJ:

The present Joint Declaration has this intention: namely, to show that on the basis of their dialogue the subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church are now able to **articulate a common understanding** of our justification by God's grace through faith in Christ.

It does not cover all that either church teaches about justification; it does **encompass a consensus** on basic truths of the doctrine of justification and shows that **the remaining differences in its explication are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.**²

The issue of mutual condemnations between Lutheran and Catholics has been a thorn in the case of the credibility of the Christian faith and against the witness of Christians to the world.

The overcoming of hostility for the sake of peace and Christian witness is therefore is to be welcomed. This can only happen when Christians talk to one another to dispel prejudice.

D. Premise: Multifaceted content of Justification

Justification is the forgiveness of sins (cf. Rom. 3:23-25; Acts 13:39; Luke 18:14), liberation from the dominating power of sin and death (Rom 5:12-21) and from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:10-14). It is acceptance into communion with God: already now, but then fully in God's coming kingdom (Rom. 5:1f).

It unites with Christ and with his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:5). It occurs in the reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism and incorporation into the one body (Rom. 8:1f, 9f; I Cor. 12:12f). All this is from God alone, for Christ's sake, by grace, through faith in "the gospel of God's Son" (Rom. 1:1-3).

E. Heart of the Declaration

The JDDJ states:

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.

² *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ), JD.5 (emphasis supplied). Retrieved from: http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

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.³

According to the Religion News Service:

The Joint Declaration effectively closes the centuries-old 'faith versus works' debate by merging the Lutheran and Catholic views on salvation rather than setting them against each other.”

“By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part,” its key passage said, “we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works.”⁴

What the text JDDJ does not make explicit are the belief systems behind the words such as grace, faith, or merit, to mention a few key concepts. The Roman Catholic understanding of salvation presupposes a whole context and framework which needs to be taken into consideration in dialogues with the Catholics. Words and expressions such as righteousness and infusion of grace are inseparable from the role of the sacraments in salvation. An understanding of the distinction between strict, condign, and congruent merit in Catholic theology must be factored in to clearly identify the undergirding assumptions and the language and terms of the dialogue on the doctrine of justification. The Catholic understanding of the role and the keeping of the ten commandments in relation to salvation needs a closer look. This is not the space to elaborate further on these important issues.

Suffice it in this short account of current trends in interchurch relations to highlight some of the perspectives Seventh-day Adventists bring into the global Christian conversation on the issue of justification.

³ Id., JD.15.

⁴ Tom Heneghan, “Reformed churches endorse Catholic-Lutheran accord on key Reformation dispute,” *Religion News Service* (July 6, 2017). Retrieved from: <http://religionnews.com/2017/07/06/reformed-churches-endorse-catholic-lutheran-accord-on-key-reformation-dispute/>.

II. Seventh-day Adventist Understanding and Perspectives

It is important that Seventh-day Adventists be distinguished not only for what we are *against* but also for what we are *for*.

Adventists, while encouraging peace, cooperation, and partnerships among Christians, advocate a holistic approach to doctrinal unity. The doctrine of justification by faith is inseparable from the righteousness of Christ, the sufficiency of Jesus Christ as unique mediator between God and human beings, the New Covenant priesthood of all believers grounded on the principle of equality and direct access to God through Jesus Christ. The priesthood of all believers is based also on the fact that all believers are temples of the Holy Spirit, inhabited by God's Spirit, which produces God's fruit of righteousness: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

A. The Doctrine of Justification

Seventh-day Adventists have a particular attachment to the doctrine of justification by faith as it is entirely based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Justification was the crux of many doctrinal disputes in the centuries since the Reformation. But from an Adventist perspective, the righteousness of Christ is the ground of our hope. One of the pioneers of the Adventist movement, Ellen G. White, puts it as follows: "Our only ground of hope is in the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and in that [righteousness] wrought by His Spirit working in and through us."⁵ She further states that:

By His perfect obedience [Christ has made it possible for every human being to obey God's commandments. When we submit ourselves to Christ, the heart is united with His heart, the will is merged in His will, the mind becomes one with His mind, the thoughts are brought into captivity to Him, we live His life. This is what it means to be clothed with the garment of His righteousness . . . which is perfect obedience to the law of Jehovah.⁶

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., 1999), 63.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 2003), 312.

Seventh-day Adventist connection with righteousness by faith is rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus began his teaching by setting the bar very high. He said: “If your righteousness does not surpass that of the Scribes and the Pharisees, you shall by no means enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 5:20).

Jesus is the righteousness of God. This is the core revelation of the whole Christian faith. The gospels are a veiled portrait of Jesus as the righteousness of God. The beatitudes apply to Jesus as the righteousness of God. The Apostle Paul reiterated this central truth: “Christ Jesus became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

Seventh-day Adventists agree with other Christians concerning the wonderful aspect of the doctrine according to which Jesus lived a perfect life in our behalf, for our sake. In the words of one Christian author, “Christianity is more than performing a good life—it’s about Christ performing an entirely perfect life for you—so you can live the abundant life in its entirety.”⁷

Jesus is our all-sufficient savior. Therefore, there is no one in heaven, on earth, or under the earth worthy to be a mediator between God and humans; be it an angel, a spirit, an ancestor, a so-called saint, a pope, a priest, a pastor, or any spiritual leader.

Moreover, only a savior can be a mediator. Only God can be a savior. Jesus alone is the savior. In this, too, the Reformation principle of *Solus Christus* (Christ alone) applies.

The Reformation principles are foundational for a Christianity based on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Even the first listed principle, among the famous sola, is inconceivable without the centrality of Christ. While thinking of the Sola Scriptura, not just prima, but *Tota Scriptura*, one has to remember that they testify of Jesus Christ (See John 5:39). Jesus Christ is indeed the center of all the principles of the Reformation.

⁷ Ann Voskamp in Foreword of Jefferson Bethke, *It's Not What You Think: Why Christianity is About So Much More Than Going to Heaven When You Die* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015).

1. *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone)
2. *Sola Gratia* (Grace alone)
3. *Sola Fide* (Faith alone)
4. *Solus Christus* (Christ alone)
5. *Soli Deo Gloria* (To God alone be all the glory)
6. *Presbyterii Fidelium* (Priesthood of all believers)
7. *Ecclesia Semper Reformanda* (The church in a perpetual state of being reformed
8. until the Second Coming)
9. *Conscientia Fidelium* (Freedom of Conscience)
10. *Dignitatis Humanae* (Human Dignity)
11. *Personalis Equalitatem* (Personal Equality)
12. *Crux Sola est nostra Theologia* (The Cross alone is our Theology)
13. *Deus Caritas Est* (The Love of God)

All these principles are interdependent; therefore, a holistic approach to the message of justification does more justice to the Reformation and to contemporary Christian life. Negligence of any aspect diminishes the coherence of the whole. This is the reason why the neglected role of religious freedom has been detrimental to Christian claims. Truth and freedom are inseparable.

B. The Gift of Freedom

The 16th century Reformation has initiated a movement of freedoms in many areas. Seventh-day Adventists have understood Revelation 14 as expanding our understanding of freedom. This text of Scripture focuses on God's sovereignty and his prerogative to save, thus providing freedoms. All the freedoms are encapsulated in the paradigmatic prayer for deliverance from evil Jesus taught his disciples. They are:

- Freedom from ignorance, especially freedom from ignorance of God, his law, his will and ultimate purposes. This translates into freedom from atheism, freedom from polytheism, freedom from henotheism, freedom from agnosticism. God has revealed himself and his will and purposes.
- Freedom from putting our confidence in anything else but God. Freedom from trusting in our performances, merits, or works.

- Freedom from trusting that any creature could be a mediator of our salvation.
- Freedom in the Great Controversy, especially the freedom to resist pressure.
- Freedom from submitting to the demands of the dragon, the beasts, the image of the beast, Babylon or Egypt.
- Freedom from the methods of God's enemies: authoritarianism, despotism, dictatorship, totalitarianism.
- Freedom from Babylonian captivity (Babylon is fallen).
- Freedom from condemnation.
- Freedom from annihilation.
- Freedom from unrighteousness.
- Freedom from death.
- Freedom to follow the Lamb and to fellowship with God.
- Freedom to be mindful of God.
- Freedom to give God all the glory.
- Freedom to worship God.
- Freedom to celebrate God's greatness with all the redeemed.

Seventh-day Adventists have championed freedom of conscience and religious freedom or freedom of religion or belief. This is expressed in the church's continuing advocacy against religious intolerance.

C. Freedom from Religious intolerance

In the Adventist Church, there should be no place for religious intolerance. If religious intolerance is accepted in our church, the foundation and the edifice of our very existence crumbles. We defend religious freedom because it is inseparably, incontrovertibly, connected to our identity. It is a universal human right. It is religious freedom for all: Protestant, Hindus, Muslims, Catholics, Baha'is, and Traditional or Indigenous religions.

In our dealing with other Christians or world religions, it is vital to remember that truth without freedom leads to inquisition, persecution, and murder.

Comparing our experience with that of Jacob, Ellen White admonishes, “So should the followers of Christ, as they approach the time of trouble, make every exertion to place themselves in a proper light before the people, to disarm prejudice, and to avert the danger which threatens liberty of conscience.”⁸

Even if our enemies would kill us, like Jesus we would still pray for them, bless those who would persecute us. Christianity is deeply demanding. Jesus prayed: “Father, forgive them.” Stephen, while being stoned, prayed: “Lord, do not hold this sin against them! Having said this, he fell asleep.

D. On Truth and Freedom

In our relations with other Christians, we have a twofold mission: to bear witness to truth and freedom. Claims to truth without freedom of conscience for all ends in disaster. As Ellen White wrote:

The banner of truth and religious liberty held aloft by the founders of the gospel church and by God’s witnesses during the centuries that have passed since then, has, in this last conflict, been committed to our hands.

The responsibility for this great gift rests with those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of His Word. We are to receive this Word as a supreme authority. We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men.”⁹

She also stated that:

In other churches, there are Christians who are standing in defense of the principles of temperance. We should seek to come near to these workers and make a way for them to stand shoulder to shoulder with us. We should call upon great and good men to second our efforts to save that which is lost.”¹⁰

⁸ Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Nampa, ID.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 2002), 616.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Ca.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), 68, 69.

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Ca.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 6, 110.

In reference to prayer, White said:

Our ministers should seek to come near to the ministers of other denominations. Pray for and with these men, for whom Christ is interceding. A solemn responsibility is theirs. As Christ's messengers, we should manifest a deep, earnest interest in these shepherds of the flock."¹¹

In doing so, we do our work as salt and light. No compromise, no syncretism, no diluting the integral chain of biblical truth. No signing of declarations that could obscure the scope and depth of a comprehensive and holistic doctrine of justification centered on the sufficiency of Jesus Christ in all areas pertaining to salvation and Christian living.

For Seventh-day Adventists, Scripture, the revelation of God, his purposes and His absolute will in all Scripture, *Tota Scriptura*, functions as the creed of creeds, our ultimate joint declaration.

While deeply respecting the freedom of others to believe or not to believe, Seventh-day Adventists encourage all Christians to join in affirming the sovereignty, supremacy, and unique prerogative of Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, unique mediator and ultimate restorer of God's universal order when he comes to renew all things, including the ultimate transformation of our bodies from corruptibility to incorruptibility. This is consonant with Adventist identity, message, and mission.

¹¹ Id., 78.