

The Andrew CHIU Memorial
New Testament Theological Conference



**“Justification by Faith
in Romans and Galatians”**

Response

It is my pleasure to be the respondent to the lecture given by my esteemed colleague and honored mentor, Rev. Dr. Ivan F. C. YIM, on the topic of “justification by faith.” This doctrine has always been regarded as one of the most essential Lutheran teachings, and today’s lecture is by no means unfamiliar among the Lutherans, most of whom should also be aware that the doctrine is chiefly supported by Romans and Galatians. I would like to express my most heartfelt appreciation for Rev. Dr. YIM’s effort in bringing all the pieces from the two Pauline letters together to make this profound doctrine congregation-friendly.

I daresay “justification by faith” has gained the common consensus among all Christians, not only the Lutherans; yet undeniably, this is also the doctrine that distinguish the Lutherans from the believers of other denominations. I am not neglecting the fact that the Andrew CHIU Memorial New Testament Theological

Conference is open to public, welcoming all participants of all kinds of backgrounds, but since this conference takes place in Concordia Theological Seminary, supposedly in the Lutheran context, I may as well take the boldness to address the issue concerning the differences among denominations. As Rev. Dr. YIM rightfully highlights in his lecture: “Regeneration and sanctification come after God’s justifying work.” This subtly marks the misunderstanding that the other denominations have towards the Lutheran Church, which has long been criticized for placing inadequate emphasis on “sanctification.” In contrast, we may as well query how earnestly the other denominations are taking the doctrine of “justification by faith.”

This brings our attention to a document of historical significance, which is the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JDDJ) issued by the

Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 1997. The involvement of the two parties in the JDDJ was highly symbolic, signifying a painstaking effort of reconciliation ever since the rupture that had begun in the sixteenth century with the Roman Catholic Church then and Martin Luther. If the chasm even between the two poles can be resolved, there seems to be no reason for any denominations to prevent ecumenism from happening. However, the JDDJ probably reflects nothing more than the wishful thinking of the PCPCU and the LWF. The sarcastic fact is that the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS), whose practice has been closely followed by the Lutheran Church – Hong Kong Synod (LCHKS), is not a member of the LWF.

In response to the JDDJ, the LCMS, having no

involvement in it, overtly announced their disagreement from a confessional Lutheran perspective, especially pointing out that it would be self-deceiving to take the fundamental differences as “acceptable”¹ for the sake of achieving the so-called compromise. The following points highlight some of the areas which, in the LCMS's opinion, prove the infeasibility of compromising with the Roman Catholic Church:

1. Justification is forensic, i.e., when God declares a sinner righteous on account of and in Christ, not the internal transformation of the believer. It is something accomplished in Christ, instead of a grace-driven process happening in man.
2. Grace is the undeserved favor from God which has nothing to do with works, not something that is infused through the spiritual power pouring

¹ The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, English language edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), ¶40.

into the soul by which we love God and merit salvation.

3. The doctrine of justification should be the center of all faith and theology, not just one truth among others.
4. Original sin is the real sin that remains after baptism, instead of something that is eradicated by baptism.²

According to the position of the LCMS, even though the JDDJ deserves the rejoicing over the affirmation “that Lutherans and Roman Catholics are Christians who have much more in common than what divides them,” it is naïve to assume that it is a “breakthrough” that resolves the division between Rome and Wittenberg. On the contrary, it is far more sensible to

² The Department of Systematic Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, *A Response to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (St. Louis: The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, 1999).

admit that “such a breakthrough will only be achieved through honest dialogue, each side not only seeking what unites, but also honoring what still divides.”³

This prompts the Lutherans to reexamine their Lutheran identity: what do Lutheran Confessions mean to the Lutherans? The sharp division between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics is but one example. We should also acknowledge the fact that different denominations exist because of different theological viewpoints, so that it is natural and reasonable for the Lutherans to identify how they are different from the believers of other denominations. It does not necessarily mean that the Lutherans has the supreme power to excommunicate other denominations by accusing them of giving false

³ The Department of Systematic Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, *A Response to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (St. Louis: The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, 1999).

teachings just because their teachings do not match with Lutheran theology, for nowadays there has already been a consensus established within the Christian community on what are classified as heresies. Nevertheless, the Lutherans ought to decide for themselves whether to participate in joint-denomination activities or ecumenical movements. There is no definite answer to this question, as it is simply related to personal preference. Anyway, do not be afraid of the differences, and do not pretend that they do not exist.

Most Christians whom I know, no matter of which denominations, feel particularly uneasy when people of other beliefs or with no belief attack Christianity for being exclusive and monopolistic, denying all the deities of other religions. I daresay my personal observation reflects much of the reality. Moreover, I used to feel the very same way, on the one hand

disturbed by the specious arguments, and on the other seeking to maintain a good image for Christianity. Yet I have come to learn not to be afraid of saying that Christianity ought to be exclusive, because the Bible says explicitly that our God is “a jealous God” (Exod 20:5, 34:14; Deut 4:24, 5:9, 6:15; Josh 24:19; Nah 1:2), so that Christianity will no longer be Christianity if we proclaim a faith that is not monotheistic, and a God that is not exclusive. Should we give up the most fundamental principles of our belief in order not to offend people of other beliefs?

From this wider scope, I once again am narrowing down to the question of Lutheran identity. Why should the Lutherans be afraid to talk about how Lutheran theology differs? We may as well reassess the reason for the Lutherans to be criticized for putting far less emphasis on “sanctification” than the other denominations. As Rev. Dr. YIM points out, the effects

on our justification, which obviously is what we care most about, are: (1) attaining the identity of becoming sons of God, and (2) eagerness to do what is good in response to the membership of the messianic community of Jesus. “To do what is good” is the general interpretation of “sanctification” within the Christian community, but how “sanctification” is acquired has always been the crux of the problem.

Rev. Dr. YIM concludes: “Justification by faith *alone apart from works* is the right interpretation of the Scriptures” (italicization mine). “Sanctification” is what a mature Christian naturally desires to pursue, but from the Lutheran perspective, this is not something that can be thoroughly achieved through human efforts. According to *The Lutheran Difference*, “Christian sanctification is not perfected in this life, not even in one such as the apostle Paul.” In addition: “The continual process of our sanctification will come

to an end. There will come a day – though not in this life – when we are no longer ‘saint and sinner,’ but wholly and only saints.”⁴ In other words, “believers continue to struggle with temptation throughout life and do not attain sinless perfection until they are brought to heaven.”⁵ Therefore, it is not true that the Lutherans neglect the topic of “sanctification”; instead, the Lutherans are merely talking about “sanctification” in such a way that makes a Lutheran a Lutheran.

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⁴ Edward A. Engelbrecht, ed., *The Lutheran Difference: An Explanation & Comparison of Christian Beliefs* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 277.

⁵ Engelbrecht, ed., 279.