

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Lutheran-Roman Catholic Consensus

Colleagues,

Two items again today.

Peace & Joy! Ed

I. THE LCMS AND JDDJ

Well, that was a surprise. Yesterday's number of USA TODAY, not exactly one of the major religious journals in our nation, carried a full-page "Comment" by the president of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod [LCMS] with this banner headline: Toward True Reconciliation. A Comment on Lutheran-Roman Catholic Relations. The focus was JDDJ, the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" which the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran World Federation co-signed on Reformation Day a few weeks ago. Seems that some of the unlettered out in the provinces have either congratulated LCMSers or critiqued them for going along with the Catholics on this one. And already on more than one occasion LCMS president Alvin Barry has had to say: "No, that's not us." Presumably this page in USA TODAY will set the record straight nationwide.

As an LCMS has-been I read his text with specific lenses, of course. For example...

1. I twinge at his claim that "45 percent of the Lutheran church-bodies in the world did not support the declaration." N.B., that's 45% of the CHURCH-BODIES, not of the world's Lutherans. I'll bet that

half of those church bodies (maybe more) are members of the Lutheran World Conference—I think that’s the name—an international consortium of LCMS-friendly folks. Created by the LCMS not too many years ago, it has as one of its platform planks a firm “No!” to the Lutheran World Federation [LWF], those folks who did sign off on this declaration at Augsburg a few weeks ago. LCMS-insiders tell me that what holds them together, besides their opposition to the LWF, is their access to funds from St. Louis for taking such a “firm” confessional stance. Granted, numbers say nothing about what’s true and what isn’t. Yet some of those “church-bodies” are very very small, some with but a handful of congregations. So Barry’s “45% did not support the declaration” pushes the envelope of the truth about the real numbers.

2. And truth is Barry’s concern. He says: “We rejoice that we have much in common with our fellow Christians in the Roman Catholic Church...[but]... We could not support the declaration because it does not actually reconcile the difference between us concerning the most important TRUTH of Christianity.” Barry then states that truth, articulating the Christian Gospel in LCMS language, nuanced in the rhetoric of post-Reformation Lutheran orthodoxy. As one of you readers, an Anglican, once said about Anglican theology: “What’s there is not bad, but it’s not complete.” For now I’ll let that pass. It’s the next paragraph, I suspect, that will get Barry into trouble, when he tells the world of USA TODAY what “the Roman Catholic Church teaches.”
3. Here’s his full text: “The Roman Catholic Church teaches that something more than trust in Christ is necessary for us to be saved. It teaches that we are

able to merit, through our works, eternal life for ourselves and others. We believe this teaching obscures the work of Jesus Christ and clouds the central message of the Bible.” Since the JDDJ, signed by the Pope’s envoys at Augsburg this fall, says the exact opposite of Barry’s first sentence here, I can’t imagine that he won’t catch flak for telling the world what the Roman Church teaches. Granted, there may well be some, maybe even multitudes of, RCs who do teach what Barry describes, but after Augsburg 1999, they no longer are speaking for “the Roman Catholic Church.”

4. There are also LCMSers—and ELCAers too—who teach and preach a Lutheran variant on “more than trust in Christ is necessary for us to be saved.” Such Lutherans have finessed a way to do this even while they are reciting the Lutheran shibboleth, “faith alone.” The heresy goes all the way back to the Judaizers in the Galatian congregation of the N.T. era. In Galatia Christ was indeed confessed as Lord and Savior, but then some “plus” was added to that Gospel. The add-on is something liturgical or ethical or experiential or affective, some plus that you’ve “gotta” have before you are “really” saved. That’s the “*opinio legis*,” say the Lutheran confessions, that opinion about the law, which has infected the human race since Adam. It’s a “Jesus yes!” proclamation followed by a “yes, but....” Since it’s an opinion in people’s heads and hearts, it’s seldom fazed by any JDDJ sorts of theological statements. Of course Judaizers deny that they are doing this. [I know that I do when I’m Judaizing.] Like major league demons, as Jesus once said, it may take “prayer and fasting” to exorcise it. Though

Gospel-plussing can be subtle, you can't hide it entirely. Eventually "by their words (not their works) ye shall know them."

5. In our pre-Seminex hassles a quarter century ago with the LCMS we were being hounded by the "'you gottas" of the then president. One specific one was his "Statement on Biblical and Confessional Principles" laid before us and the not-so-gentle pressure: you gotta sign. To our ears those principles were clear add-ons to the "faith alone" principle we were committed to. Missouri's current president stands fully in the tradition of that earlier president. Wouldn't it be a hoot if the ensuing debate that his full-pager yesterday may well elicit leads the RC partners to exposing Barry's "you gottas" as urging "something more than trust in Christ is necessary for us to be saved," the very charge he lays at their door.
6. So stay tuned. It could just be that the next major round of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue does not take place between the signatories of JDDJ, but between the non-signatory LCMS and the Roman Church. Wouldn't that be ironic? Surely the One sitting in the heavens is already laughing. Just imagine. RC voices using JDDJ in arguing with Al Barry on just what the doctrine of justification really is—and "they" showing "him" how his "teaching obscures the work of Jesus Christ and clouds the central message of the Bible."

II. ANOTHER ONE ON JDDJ

[In ThTh #75 we sent out some responses we'd received to ThTh74. One of those responses said that JDDJ was hyping faith the way scholastic theology did. It was "fides caritate formata," a formula that says "faith fleshed out

with works of charity is the faith that justifies.” It was not JBFA, justification by faith alone. Here’s a response from Nathan Schroeder, a Crossings alum, to that critic.]I am moved to respond to “‘S,’ a prof at one of those seminaries,” who was concerned about the role of works in the JDDJ. I am not a scholar of Lutheranism as you and he (she?) are; but I don’t see what he/she saw in **JDDJ**.

As I read the document, it is in the shape of a chi (X): it starts broadly with background, focuses to a central point, and then broadens out to consider some implications of the central point. And what is the central point? I think it is paragraph 15, which comes to the conclusion: “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.” To reiterate: By grace alone, in faith, ... we are accepted by God. Sounds like JBFA to me.

Section 4.7 later (in the widening part of the chi) explicates this confession with regard to good works. The section starts: “We confess together that good works – a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love – follow justification and are its fruits.” Note the language of sequence: good works follow justification. Justification comes first, then the good works; so how can the justification be dependent on the works? This section goes on to reiterate in the Catholic paragraph: “When Catholics affirm the ‘meritorious’ character of good works, ... their intention is... not ... to deny that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace.” Likewise in the Lutheran paragraph: Lutherans “understand eternal life in accord with the New Testament as unmerited ‘reward’ ...”

I am reminded of the hymn text: "For faith alone can justify; Works serve the neighbor and supply/ The proof that faith is living." Such a concept of "proof" can be problematic to some; but to whom need we "prove" our faith? To the church, to our neighbors, to the Spanish Inquisition? No; "Judge not, lest ye be judged." To God? Heavens, no; He who sees into our very hearts needs no outward evidence of their contents. To our pastor? A pastor, perhaps, is called by God and the Church to inquire as to our faith, but even there I'm not sure. I think the true purpose for works "proving" the existence of faith is to prove it to ourselves. Like Nicodemus, we often don't understand what we are told; so this can be our measurement of our understanding. If we say (even to ourselves) that we have faith, but we find ourselves unmoved to charity and unmotivated toward love, then this confession, this declaration, indicts our understanding of what faith means. "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom." A true faith in Christ will lead a person to a Christian life of love; anything that calls itself faith, but leads another direction, is false. But it is not for us to observe others and condemn their faith for the lack of works visible to us; the matter is strictly between the believer and God.

[For next Thursday: An erstwhile dean of an Episcopal cathedral here in the USA responds to ThTh #74 "Preaching the name."]