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Living Toward One Another  
with the Word of God

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## BRIEF STUDIES

(EDITORIAL NOTE: The faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, adopted this statement on justification May 25, 1965, as part of its 125th anniversary celebration.)

### JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

#### I. *The Occasion for This Statement*

This statement on the doctrine of justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, is presented by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, Missouri, as a conclusion to the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of this institution for the training of Lutheran clergy. The stature of this doctrine in the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, its significance in the history of The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, and the interest in it revived by the discussions before and since the Helsinki Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in 1963, have suggested it as a field for special study. As the more than fifty men of this faculty shared in research and discussion on this theme, they endeavored not only to engage in the discipline appropriate to teachers of the church, but to speak the Word of God to each other for justification and edification.

Does justification by faith still deserve to be called "the chief article of Christian doctrine" (Apology, IV, 2; FC, SD, III, 6)? Has the church's preaching, religious education, worship, and cure of souls shifted to a different central emphasis? Is it sufficient under this term to think of the actions of God's grace in general, or is there importance and vitality in the scope of the term "justification by faith" originally outlined in Scripture?

In this hour Christendom is especially aware of its responsibility to contemporary man. Can the teaching of justification by faith reach him? Does this doctrine still occupy its important position as the church

nurtures the faith of its own members and then thrusts them into their callings in the world and prepares them for their witness to it?

This document examines the shape of the doctrine of justification by faith in basic Biblical terms and briefly articulates its significance for the church today. These lines do not propose to be a comprehensive or a definitive statement, but an invitation to fellow-Christians throughout the world to continue in study, and grow in appreciation and use, of the forgiving grace of God in Jesus Christ as the ground and source of our life under God.

#### II. *The Biblical Doctrine*

Basic to the understanding of the justification through faith is the recognition that God has made man, that He sustains man for His purposes, that He makes Himself known to man, that He judges man's works (Acts 17:22-31; Ex. 20:1-6). Therefore man has one need that transcends every other: to be in the right relation with God (Matt. 6:33). This need is so acute because mankind has severed that relation, has turned against God in rebellion or neglected Him in impenitence or denied Him through the worship of false gods (Is. 59:1-15; 64; Jer. 2:9-13; Rom. 2:1-12). That relation can be restored only through the gift and grace of God (Rom. 3:9-26). The restored relation is described under various terms, e.g., being holy, set apart to fulfill God's purposes (Ex. 19:5, 6; Jer. 2:2, 3; Luke 1:74, 75); having life, living now and in the future age with and from the power that God has given and continues to give (Deut. 30:19, 20; John 3:14-16; 2 Cor. 4:11). In this study the term under consideration is "being righteous before God," "having the righteousness of God," "being justified."

The Old Testament records God's judgment and wrath upon man's disobedience (e. g., Deut. 29:18 ff.; Ps. 75) and His acts of mercy and rescue. The righteous works of God include the gracious election of Abraham and of Israel, His "first-born son," the redemption of Israel from Egypt, the life-giving covenant and promised land, and the promises of a new people, a new covenant based on forgiveness, and a new David (Micah 6:5 refers to the righteous acts of God; cf. also 1 Sam. 12:7; Ps. 103:6). The righteous activity of God brings man to stand in the right relation to God; in that way God exhibits His righteousness (Is. 61:10; 51:5; 5:16). The undeserved election of Israel as God's own people is the most forceful demonstration of the righteousness of God in the Old Testament (Deut. 7:6-8; cf. 8:4, 5).

Also in the New Testament man's natural situation is described as being under God's wrath and disapproval. Man is unable by his own efforts to win God's favorable verdict (Rom. 1:18—3:19; Gal. 3:10). But the righteousness of God, His will to forgive and not to hold man's rebellion or waywardness against him, is revealed through His redeeming act in Christ, by which Christ becomes a curse for man through His death on the Cross; thus man has the righteousness of God by God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 3:20-26; Gal. 3:31)

The man who acknowledges that God is concerned and judging is perennially tempted to secure God's approval by his own effort. The prophets attacked this presumptuousness (Is. 1:11-17; Micah 6:1-8); Jesus Christ combated it at the risk of His own life (Matt. 5:20; Luke 18:9-14); St. Paul, himself a Pharisee (Phil. 3:4-11), was especially sensitive to its damage and sought to correct it through the teaching of Law and Promise. The Law reveals man as condemned; the Promise or Gospel, God's Word in Christ to man, pronounces man righteous in the act

by which God Himself is "just," performing the act essential to His very being (Rom. 1:16; 3:19-26).

When St. Paul uses the term justification, he does not mean that man is given the ethical perfection to equal the demands of God (Titus 3:3-7), or that God justifies only by replacing the sinful record of man with the perfect conduct of Christ (Gal. 4:4-6 and 3:13). Rather does St. Paul view the entire incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ as the gift of the merciful God, for whose sake He does not hold man's sin against him (Rom. 3:24, 25; 5; 2 Cor. 5:18-21).

Man is justified by God "through faith." St. Paul stresses this fact to reinforce the principle that God's grace does everything and man makes no contribution on the basis of which he can claim God's benign verdict (Rom. 11:6); God imputes faith as righteousness (Rom. 4:5, 20-22), that faith which rejects self-righteousness and clings wholly to the promise of God. Faith is, however, itself the gift of God through the Holy Spirit to the sinner, as he hears the word of God's mercy in Christ that Jesus our Lord was "delivered for our offences and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:24, 25; 10:8-17), as he is baptized into the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:5-7), as he employs the Scriptures "which are able to instruct (him) for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Tim. 3:15)

Righteousness has fruits (Rom. 5:1-5; 2 Cor. 9:10; Phil. 1:11). The faith which clings to the grace of God and attempts to make no contribution for standing in God's forgiveness is never by itself (James 2:17). Faith works through love (Gal. 5:6, 13). It not only holds the believer under a verdict of God expressed in the past, but also places him under a reign of God's grace that continues in the age to come and directs all action and thought of the believer now. (Rom. 5:21)

### III. *The Church's Use of the Doctrine*

The Lutheran Reformation was in part a reaction to a series of medieval developments in the doctrine of grace that closely paralleled the misunderstandings against which St. Paul had protested. Thus it returned the doctrine of the justification of the sinner before God by grace for Christ's sake through faith to its primitive importance in Christian teaching. Contemporary Roman Catholic thought appears strikingly evangelical by comparison with older interpretations of the decrees of the Council of Trent. The need continues, in the interconfessional conversation, to find proper understanding and language for the faith and life of the Christian: both are completely the gift of God's grace and forgiveness; both are genuinely the actions of heart and will of the believer who stands under that grace.

The centuries since the Reformation have tended also in Lutheran teaching to remove justification through faith from its former prominence. Lutheran systematic theology has on occasion tended to include under "justification" the total process of God's grace restoring man, and has not reserved the term for the believer's standing under the gracious verdict of God's acquittal. Much contemporary preaching, hymnody, and catechetics stress salvation and the ultimate rescue from sin and death through the grace of God, while being comparatively silent concerning the sinner's justification through faith.

Christians do well to refresh their insight and their use of the doctrine of justification by faith, on every level of Christian education and witness. Several special considerations present themselves.

1. How can contemporary man be reached and helped by the message of justification by faith, since he is not interested in Luther's basic concern, "How shall I find a gracious God?" and finds the concept of God irrelevant? The answer to this question lies primarily in the Christian's will to live by the

conviction that the Lord is God, to rejoice in the Creator's gifts, and to display his own respect for the judgment of Almighty God. In an age that is frankly nihilistic and materialistic, Christian teaching and preaching can find language for the word of God's Law indicting man's rebellion and waywardness. But both that Law, and the Gospel that comes as God's word of mercy, must be spoken by sinners who are declared righteous before God through God's mercy alone, with meekness and the will to help a world that lies in darkness and needs the light of God's restoration in Christ.

2. Does the present interest in "the world come of age," coupled with current accents on cosmic restoration through Christ, suggest a weakening of the Gospel that is preached to the goal of justifying sinners by faith and thus setting them apart from the world? Again the answer to this question must begin with the recognition of the predicament of the human race as it exists under the judgment of God. When man's predicament and impotence are duly faced, the need of the word of forgiveness will also receive its due, and God's gift of righteousness to the believer of standing approved in His sight, appears precious, indispensable, to be shared at all cost.

At once it must also be said: when God draws the sinner into His chosen people through the word of grace which has wrought justifying faith, that act of God does not license the sinner to withdrawal from the world, pride in his status, neglect of his fellow-believer, diffidence and carelessness concerning the attacks on Christian faith and life which are always launched against them.

Justification through faith, and the believer's righteousness before God, are not simply doctrines to be discussed and clarified, affirmed and defended. But God, by giving His Son into death and raising Him from the dead, and by placing the word of that gift

upon the lips of His people, summons, enlists, and sends them for His purposes throughout the world and to every generation until Christ comes again. The righteousness in which they stand before Him is His everlasting arms beneath them and the guar-

antee of His Spirit within them, it is God Himself giving the patience, courage, and joy by which His people nurture one another in the body of Christ and fare forth to speak with their lips and lives the faith that is in their heart.