

Ecumenical challenge: A new story for Protestants and Catholics

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On October 31, Lutherans and Roman Catholics will celebrate the signing of a joint declaration on justification by faith. In that declaration, both parties agree that "all persons depend completely on the saving grace of God for their salvation," and that new life in Christ 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." Such words take a dramatic step toward resolving a 16th-century dispute that was at the heart of the Protestant break from the Roman Catholic Church. They also take a step toward ending certain Protestant stereotypes about Catholic beliefs.

In that respect, the statement is not only an ecumenical achievement but an ecumenical challenge. It challenges Lutherans and other Protestants to find ways to talk about Protestant identity without claiming "justification by grace through faith" as the special biblical insight that sets them apart from Roman Catholics. In the past, the power and relevance of telling the story of Martin Luther and the Reformation and of explaining Protestant identity has come from the existence of an opposing party—those who allegedly live by works, not faith. Contemporary Catholics can no longer be cast in that role, at least not according to their official self-understanding.

Of course, Catholics and Protestants have plenty of other issues to argue about. Consider, for example, that while preparations were being made for signing the Lutheran-Catholic declaration, the Vatican issued a new edition of the *Manual of Indulgences*, which spells out the concrete acts of charity and penance by which the faithful can reduce their time in purgatory. Giving up alcohol or cigarettes and engaging in times of prayer are among the activities recommended. The church's practice of granting indulgences was another object of debate in the Reformation era. For many Protestants, the juxtaposition of these two events was puzzling, and to some it may even have seemed contradictory.

The practice of granting indulgences does not technically concern the issue of justification by faith. Rather, it concerns the issue of sanctification—how the believer, having been judged righteous by grace, is led into a deeper communion with Christ. Nevertheless, the appearance of the *Manual* underscores the fact (freely recognized in the joint declaration itself) that Lutherans and Roman Catholics retain distinctive views and vocabularies about the Christian life. They can agree that justification is an unmerited gift of grace but still differ about how the justified person grows in grace and about the church's role in shaping the sanctified life.

As Michael Root, ecumenical scholar at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, points out, fundamental disagreements remain about how to describe and understand the justified person's struggle with sin and its consequences. Catholic practice tends "toward a quantification of the struggle," Root said. And the granting of indulgences raises the question of how much authority the church has to intervene in that struggle.

That such disagreements remain is no fault of the work the joint declaration. On the contrary, one of the fruits of ecumenical conversation is that it helps locate the real points of disagreement, which are often not the ones we think they are.