

# Let the Reformation Continue!

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**We respectfully believe that the statement “Is the Reformation Over? A Statement of Evangelical Convictions” is not a sufficient description of our present theological situation.**

As the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s *95 Theses* draws near, we heartily endorse the renewed study of the Reformation and what it means for Christians today. Among the recent developments in this context, the Reformanda Initiative has released “Is the Reformation Over? A Statement of Evangelical Convictions.”<sup>2</sup> After studying this statement, we find ourselves somewhat dissatisfied, not by its positive affirmations of justification by faith alone and the full authority of the Bible, but because we question its description of the major theological problems of our time.

If we do not misunderstand the document’s intentions, it states or assumes the following:

1. A major international discussion is underway in which some serious theologians say that the Reformation is over.
2. This claim that the Reformation is over is one of the most serious problems facing evangelicalism, because it softens Evangelical convictions in a dangerous way.
3. There is one common Evangelical conviction on soteriology which one can compare with Catholic doctrine.
4. The Catholic Church has started to speak an evangelical language in order to win over Evangelicals. Some Evangelicals have been deceived by the Catholic Church’s adoption of quasi-evangelical language.
5. The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (between the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church) of 1999 expresses a “blurred position” on justification by faith.
6. The Catholic Church is wrong in the same way that it was wrong 500 years ago. Therefore we must emphasize the authority of the Bible and salvation by faith alone in contrast to Catholic errors.
7. Recent interaction between high-level Catholic and Evangelical representatives on religious freedom, human rights, and other public ethical concerns tends to reduce the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

*As conservative Reformed and Evangelical theologians, we respectfully disagree with all seven of these points and will address them individually in this response.*

**1.** The Reformanda statement says that “the ecumenical friendliness of recent times has created ripe conditions for some leaders in both camps to claim that the Reformation is all but over.”

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<sup>2</sup> The statement can be found at [www.isthereformationover.com/documents/Is%20the%20Reformation%20Over-%20A%20Statement%20of%20Evangelical%20Convictions.pdf](http://www.isthereformationover.com/documents/Is%20the%20Reformation%20Over-%20A%20Statement%20of%20Evangelical%20Convictions.pdf). It was released on October 24, 2016.

Unfortunately, the authors do not identify any such leaders. We know of no major leader in the Catholic Church, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), or the World Council of Churches (WCC) who believes this. Nobody used this language at the joint Catholic-Lutheran commemoration of the Reformation in Lund, Sweden on October 31, 2016. If anyone is expressing this view, we would be happy to join Reformanda in disagreeing with it.

In the liturgy of the worship service at Lund, everyone prayed, “Thanks be to you, O God, for the many guiding theological and spiritual insights that we have all received through the Reformation. Thanks be to you for the good transformation and reforms that were set in motion by the Reformation or by struggling with its challenges. Thanks be to you for the proclamation of the gospel that occurred during the Reformation and that since then has strengthened countless people to live lives of faith in Jesus Christ.” To us, this sounds much more like “Let the Reformation continue!” than “The Reformation is over.”

We do not know exactly what a statement that “the Reformation is over” means. The Reformanda statement suggests one possible meaning when it indicates that some believe “that the primary theological disagreements that led to the rupture in Western Christianity in the sixteenth century have been resolved.” However, it does not say who believes this. We surely do not, partly because the rupture in Western Christianity in the sixteenth century included several different profound theological disagreements. Moreover, we do not know of any global Christian body—not the Vatican, the WCC, the WEA, the secretaries of Christian World Communions, or the Global Christian Forum—that holds the view that all primary theological disagreements have been solved. On the contrary, in our extensive discussions (as representatives of the WEA) with these other groups, we have heard frequent and repeated acknowledgements that very serious theological differences remain unresolved.

We know that the late Bishop Tony Palmer stated privately several years ago that Luther’s protest is finished. By those words we think he meant not that Luther’s efforts (and the entire Reformation) were unneeded, but rather that the main point of Luther’s teaching, justification by faith alone, is now acceptable to the Catholic Church and its earthly head. We are hesitant to speak in the way Palmer did because it oversimplifies what the Reformation was about and also makes it sound as if our hundreds of millions of Evangelical Christians grasp justification by faith. It is far better, we believe, to say that both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have a huge amount of basic pastoral and educational work to do to train our members in what it means to truly trust in justification by grace through faith.

In Lund, both Catholics and Lutherans stated that progress in some areas has provided sufficient encouragement that it makes sense to talk about further major disagreements. But no one said that all deep differences have been solved.

The Reformanda statement suggests that any remaining theological disagreements “are considered matters of legitimate difference in emphasis, but not sharp points of division and contrast.” Certainly this is true of *some* topics, but not all of them. We know of no one who is making this claim with regard to matters of theological disagreement such as the role of Mary.

**2 and 3.** These two statements imply that the Evangelical world is theologically in good health and of one opinion. This view is mistaken.

The traditional Lutheran and Reformed view of salvation and justification, which we hold firmly, has never been the only view within the Evangelical movement, and it is surely not the undisputed, only and unifying view among Evangelicals today, even though we hope that it is on the rise within the Evangelical community presently.

We agree that a softening of core theological convictions has been taking place within many Evangelical communities. We disagree that discussions with Catholicism have played any role in

this softening. In our experience, factors threatening the theological integrity of Evangelicalism include the following:

- Interest in systematic theology is diminishing worldwide. We notice this, for example, in the increasing vagueness on such issues as baptism among students in theological schools today.
- Bible reading and Bible knowledge are diminishing.
- The range of views held by Evangelicals on any particular theological topic, including soteriology, is broadening constantly.
- The various forms of the so-called health and wealth gospel, which has attracted millions of followers, distort the good news of the gospel.
- Under the influence of a postmodern type of dualism, some church members, students, and even pastors separate faith from truth claims, so that Christian beliefs are relegated to the non-rational realm of emotions.

All these developments, which the Reformanda statement does not mention, are dangerous, and none of them are present due to the existence of Catholic views. The Reformanda statement, however, highlights Evangelicals' weakness in criticizing Catholic doctrine as the problem. We understand that Reformanda's primary purpose is to address issues of Catholic-Evangelical relations and that its representatives would probably agree with us on the other challenges just named. Nevertheless, we do not think that a statement that highlights Evangelicals' alleged weakness in criticizing Catholic doctrine while overlooking these other issues describes our theological situation very well. We are facing many dangerous developments in the Evangelical world concerning essential doctrine (including soteriology) and ethics. Whether we have a theological dialogue with the Pope is, we believe, a minor factor compared to these other vital threats to the Evangelical faith.

4. Reformanda says, "The fact that millions of Catholics have become Evangelicals in recent years has not gone unnoticed by Roman Catholic leaders. They are seeking to respond strategically to this loss of their faithful by adopting traditional Evangelical language (e.g. conversion, gospel, mission, and mercy) and establishing ecumenical dialogues with churches they once condemned."

This interpretation of alleged Catholic tactics is stated as if it were a fact visible to all. We think it is just one of many possible interpretations, and the Reformanda statement does not attempt to show why this explanation is more valid than any other. There is no attempt to prove that the motivation for Catholic leaders' use of "traditional Evangelical language" has to do with Catholic believers becoming Evangelicals. The statement seems to assume that the Pope purposely deceives us or even lies to us and the public without providing clear evidence. We are afraid this could violate the ninth commandment by bearing false witness against our neighbor (in this case the Pope and other Catholic leaders). We can only report from personal experience that Pope Francis is frank and trustworthy in what he says, no matter whether one agrees with everything or not. He speaks his mind. We would observe that the Catholic Church uses the same kind of language when addressing its own members and when speaking to liberal Protestants, not only when speaking to Evangelicals. We see no evidence that the Pope uses a special language for Evangelicals and not for others. In fact, it could be argued that the present Pope's new language seems more likely to drive Catholics out of the Catholic Church than to bring non-Catholics into it.

To take another recent example, Pope Benedict's Jesus trilogy was full of so-called evangelical language. Many Evangelicals around the globe applauded the books as evidence of a greater common understanding on certain questions. But these works did not produce any noticeable movement of Evangelicals to the Catholic Church.

We have the impression that the authors of the Reformanda statement may not have paid close attention to what is actually happening in the many meetings between Evangelical and Catholic leaders at the global, regional, national, or local level. Viewing this process from afar, they have made presumptions about what is happening that are not consistent with reality. The theological dialogue taking place today is quite sophisticated. It is a genuine discussion about different positions and how to argue for them from the Bible and history. In the midst of these discussions, Lund proved that the Reformation has truly not been sold out nor made void; rather, the time may be right for the central teachings of the Reformation to reach a larger number of Christians than ever before.

We Evangelicals who are participating in dialogue have not been so enticed by the chance to interact with Catholic leaders as to forget our theology. In fact, one of us is known for studying Martin Luther and other Reformation texts while waiting for a meeting at the Vatican to begin. If these meetings have had any effect on our personal theology and spiritual life, it has been to make us more consciously grateful for what we have learned from the Reformation and our Evangelical heritage.

5. The Reformanda statement says that the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ), signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church in 1999, expresses a “blurred position” on justification. We believe that this is a mistaken interpretation of the JDDJ. The definition of justification in the joint declaration (the only main theme of the text that should heavily concern Christians who are neither Catholics nor Lutherans) reads as follows:

¶ 15. 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. 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.

¶ 16. All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God’s gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

¶ 17. We also share the conviction that the message of justification directs us in a special way towards the heart of the New Testament witness to God’s saving action in Christ: it tells us that as sinners our new life 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.

We do not consider this a blurred position. On the contrary, we could wish that every Evangelical preacher and teacher declared the doctrine of justification by faith so clearly!

Reformanda also contends that the 1999 document on justification “explicitly affirms the Council of Trent’s view of justification.” We wish that the statement would give a source for this claim. Our study of the 1999 document reveals two mentions of the Council of Trent in the text and five in the footnotes, but the definition of justification is not taken from the Council of Trent and does not affirm the doctrine of the Council of Trent. Nothing from Trent is part of what Lutherans and Catholics agreed on. After reading the text numerous times with precisely this question in view, we believe that the JDDJ does not affirm the Council of Trent’s doctrine on justification. Perhaps not all Roman Catholic leaders affirm justification by faith alone, but it appears to us that the official Roman Catholic representatives who signed the JDDJ honestly affirmed justification by faith alone.

At the end of the Tirana Consultation on discrimination, persecution, and martyrdom in November 2015, after senior representatives of the Catholic Church had repented and apologized

for their church's role in persecuting other churches, Efraim Tendero, Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, delivered a speech in response. He acknowledged that Evangelicals have sometimes misrepresented Roman Catholics and Roman Catholic doctrine. He said, "We will do whatever possible to help and train our people to overcome prejudices against other Christian traditions and not to confuse things from the past with present realities."<sup>3</sup> We are concerned that the Reformanda statement is confusing things from the past with present realities. It is time, we believe, to acknowledge that the teaching of the Catholic Church, or at least the teaching of some key Catholic leaders, has changed on this important point.

We receive letters wondering if we Evangelicals are going to convert in large numbers to this gracious Pope's church. But the reality is the opposite. Every day, thousands of Catholics in Latin America and in the Global South are coming over to Pentecostal and Evangelical churches, and a counter-development is not recognizable.

Our good contact with Rome accompanies a much more open, honest, and respectful dispute about differences and similarities. We have ongoing serious doctrinal conversations, and the express desire from the Catholic side is for us to clearly formulate and introduce our point of view.

The difference when compared to what used to happen is clear. The Pope sees Evangelical Christians as full-fledged believers and openly addresses the fact that the active Christian life Evangelicals and Pentecostals lead in prayer, sanctification, and in giving witness can be a model for Catholics. He has even officially apologized to the Pentecostal movement that the Catholic Church persecuted it in former times.

**6.** We surely share the convictions of the Reformanda statement's authors on the authority of the Bible and regarding salvation by faith and grace alone. It is always good and right to emphasize both. Yet we are of the opinion that both are mainly under attack largely from sources within the Protestant tradition, not from Catholics.

We are also of the opinion that the authority of the Bible plays a much greater role in the Catholic Church today, and especially for Pope Benedict and Pope Francis, than it played 460 years ago during the Council of Trent. And the view taken of the definition and the importance of justification by most Catholic exegetes and both living popes today is much closer to the New Testament position than to the position of the Council of Trent.<sup>4</sup>

One of our concerns regarding the Reformanda statement is the relationship between Scripture and tradition reflected in its theological method. The Reformanda statement twice points to the authority of the Bible, but its actual content does not do justice to the authority of the Bible, as it does not argue on the basis of exegesis but only on the basis of history. We would suggest that our primary approach should not be to defend confessional positions or positions that treat a specific point in time in church history as the peak of theology. We should first argue exegetically, to see what the Bible says on any topic, and then study and search all of church history, including the three quarters of church history prior to Luther. We hope we are self-critical enough to guard against committing the opposite but analogous mistake in our own theological method, that of focusing too heavily on our present theological situation and not largely expositing the Bible. (Should you

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<sup>3</sup> For Bishop Tendero's message, see <http://www.worldea.org/pdf/Bishop%20Efraim%20Tendero%20-%20Final%20Message%20GCF.pdf>. For reports about the Tirana consultation, see <http://www.worldea.org/news/4621/historic-gathering-of-global-christian-leaders-urges-churches-and-governments-to-address-growing-concern-for-persecution-of-christians> and <https://www.bucer.org/resources/resources/details/bonner-querschnitte-492015-ausgabe-385-eng.html>. For the Tirana message see <http://www.worldea.org/pdf/GCF%20Full%20Message.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Paragraph 1 of the preamble to the JDDJ states, "The doctrine of justification was particularly asserted and defended in its Reformation shape and special valuation over against the Roman Catholic Church and theology of that time, which in turn asserted and defended a doctrine of justification of a different character." We see in these words an acknowledgement that Roman Catholic theology today is substantially different from the theology of the Council of Trent.

review our other works, we think you will find that we do invest serious efforts in biblical exposition and exegesis.)

It is simply not accurate to contend that the Catholic Church has not changed. Looking at recent Catholic doctrine and practice from the point of view of traditional Lutheran and Reformed doctrine, one sees great progress in some areas (such as lay people reading the Bible, the diminishing role of higher criticism in the church's teaching, and soteriology) and regress in other areas (since Luther's time several dogmas about Mary have been added, the last one in 1950, which have widened the gap between us).

In some areas, Catholic doctrine has varied considerably, such as regarding the role of the papacy. Around 1800, with the loss of the Vatican state, the pope's role seemed to decline, but during the 19th century, new dogmas on infallibility and related themes widened the distance between Catholics and Protestants. This situation prevailed up through Pope John Paul II and his Code of Canon Law (1983), in which even a Roman Catholic Synod lost any official authority, so that Synod decisions are binding only if signed by the Pope. However, since the death of Pope John Paul II, we have seen a clear decrease in the Catholic view of the Pope's power and role.

7. The Reformanda statement says, "In our global world, we encourage cooperation between Evangelicals and Catholics in areas of common concern, such as the protection of life and the promotion of religious freedom." Here we agree fully. Indeed, three-quarters of our discussions with Pope Francis and Vatican leaders have been on topics of religious freedom, persecution of Christians, and human rights.

Both of us and many other representatives of the WEA invested countless hours over more than two years in preparations for the November 2015 Tirana Consultation; we regard this as one of our greatest accomplishments in cooperation with the Vatican. We would invite all the people who worked on and signed the recent Reformanda statement to join us in these efforts. We urgently need more researchers, writers, diplomats, and activists!

One of us (Dr. Johnson) published the second edition of *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* jointly on behalf of the WEA and a Vatican-based think tank, DHI, in mid-2016, following more than three years of cooperation with DHI on human rights and broader humanitarian concerns. We hope that this will be one small step toward increased research and publishing related to human rights and religious freedom in cooperation with Roman Catholic institutions.

The authors of the Reformanda statement seem to see only two ways of interaction between Evangelicals and Catholics: clear disagreement on theology and full cooperation on issues of religious freedom and social engagement. We doubt that it is so easy to fully separate the two; for example, some Catholics like to carry pictures of Mary while participating in pro-life marches. The reality is much more complex, since we are talking about the relations of nearly two billion people to each other. It changes from country to country, from topic to topic, and always has much to do with the personalities of the specific people involved on both sides. Generally, in the midst of cooperation about human rights, there is dialogue about theological questions in which both sides spell out their convictions frankly and clearly, but we do not think that this is causing Evangelicals to become softer in their theological convictions. We do open ourselves to learning from each other. In fact, we have found that in the context of such cooperative endeavors, Catholic bishops, scholars, and journalists regularly ask, "What do you Evangelicals think about ... ?" or "How do you Evangelicals solve this problem?"

In our current social and cultural context, it becomes even more important not to create unjustified barriers to Evangelical-Catholic cooperation. Although on some topics (such as human trafficking and government or corporate corruption), we can cooperate broadly with people of good will, on others (such as the sanctity of marriage or abortion), Roman Catholics are frequently our only prominent allies. We should not lose courage in view of the terrible problems where Roman Catholics are our primary partners; together we make up a group totaling almost 2 billion people.

With God's blessing, we may be able to reduce some injustices together. Of course, shared social values should never cause us to ignore theological differences. But we sense that the Pope sees much more in common with us than, for instance, with what used to be the Protestant state churches in Europe.

The Reformanda statement says: "The issues that gave birth to the Reformation five hundred years ago are still very much alive in the twenty-first century for the whole church." Our response is: who really questions this?

Pope Francis, in his sermon in Lund, said that the issues of the 16th-century Reformation are as valid and important as ever. Pope Benedict stressed the same sentiments when visiting Luther's church in Erfurt. We do not need to be convinced of this; it is common ground today. To quote Pope Francis in Lund:

The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing. "How can I get a propitious God?" This is the question that haunted Luther. In effect, the question of a just relationship with God is the decisive question for our lives. As we know, Luther encountered that propitious God in the good news of Jesus, incarnate, dead and risen. With the concept "by grace alone," he reminds us that God always takes the initiative, prior to any human response, even as he seeks to awaken that response. The doctrine of justification thus expresses the essence of human existence before God.

It certainly sounds to us as if Pope Francis does not believe that the Reformation is over!

The problem we face in regard to justification by faith alone is not that Roman Catholic theology is contaminating Evangelicalism. The problem is that both Catholic and Evangelical pastors, teachers, and theologians have a huge amount of work to do in educating our nearly two billion church members, who often have little familiarity with the Bible and Christian doctrine. As paragraph 43 of the JDDJ states, "Our consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification must come to influence the life and teachings of our churches." In other words, along with our Catholic colleagues, let's really get to work teaching about justification by faith!