

**Response to Walter Cardinal Kasper's Address to the Evangelical Lutheran Church
in America Conference of Bishops
October 2, 2004
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I am humbled by the invitation to respond to his eminence Walter Cardinal Kasper's address this morning. As I said to his eminence two years ago, his theological work, particularly his systematic Christology, has been deeply influential for me. Now, it happened that he told me a couple of hours ago that his work then belongs to the "sins of his youth." So, I suppose, I am in his debt, in positive and other ways, and I am happy to show my gratitude in this response. Cardinal Kasper, thank you for your theological and ecclesial leadership on behalf of Christian unity, and particularly for your welcome, illuminating and stimulating address.

Now to my brief response. It has five major points that careen from the stratospheric theological to the mundane programmatic, particularly the agenda for institutional ecumenism in the ELCA itself. All these points are excited by Cardinal Kasper's insights. And, as much as I would like to be detailed, my comments by necessity of time will be summary and synthetic, trying to point out general themes and opportunities.

1. Acknowledging real and realistic progress

It is important to affirm with his eminence that Christ's church has been blessed with general progress toward unity through the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ, hereafter JD). Simultaneously, in the Cardinal's own gentle and patient terms, it is important to acknowledge that this agreement is not fodder for an Oxford movement-like romantic enthusiasm that "all is overcome" (a sentiment we surely have seen in some quarters of ELCA life). Neither is the JD a warrant for the postmodern cynicism *du jour* that the JD is but another tired instance of marginalized Christianity's grasp for power. I agree that decades of keen and common study of scripture and attention to the missional needs of contemporary culture have brought us together in the JD, however inobservant critics-come-lately have been for these decades.

But deeper than formal agreement on theory or doctrine, through what his eminence calls "spiritual ecumenism," we have encountered and received *each other in the Gospel*. We have also, with our recognition of each other, realized in a new and urgent way that western culture, well beyond Europe, seeks faith. And the loos which led to the seeking was abetted by Christianity's own visible disunity. We bear responsibility in part for what I have come to call practical atheism, life that is lived as if God is not. These two massive recognitions led us to substantive progress in the JD. With the JD, we see and profess that we are called together into a new apostolic age, in which unity in evangelisation will, as the Cardinal said, lead a creative transformation of hopeless humanity into lives of hope, faith, and love.

2. Acknowledging an even more substantive progress

There is a deeper spiritual and theological unity expressly stated by his eminence that ultimately allows and calls for the positively differentiated consensus the Cardinal so helpfully underscored. The theological giants the Cardinal noted, led especially by Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, led—or, I should say *returned*—theology into a flowering age of *Trinitarian* thinking. The flowering of Trinitarian theology was and is a return to the fundamental, even metaphysical, vision that we are with and given to each other *in* God the Trinity. We are a social people whose lives are given in, with, and through each other, in, with and through the larger infinite presence of God: Father, Son, Spirit. As we have been able to see clearly again the reality in which we live together with our reconciled diversity, we can acknowledge what Luther did not need to acknowledge because he saw rightly already, that the doctrine of justification rest on and presumes the dogma of the Trinity. Most Lutheran dissensus today regarding the JD occurs, I believe, because many have simply forgotten (or not perceived) the fundamental Trinitarian premise of justification.

The 20th century's return to Trinitarian Christianity set the ground for our 21st century agreement in the JD. It provides the ground, clearly, for a much more, and welcome, differentiated consensus to come. Trinitarian life together, not a homogenous or monistic life together, calls for our own internal increased complementarity.

3. Acknowledging theological and ecclesial work to be done

Much has been said, more by Lutherans about Rome than conversely, that need not be rehearsed here about how our intramural and extramural major statements subsequent to the JD ought to show the consequence of the JD. I suggest that what Lutherans have offered in complaint to Rome should expect reciprocity. It would be good exercise of spiritual ecumenism already to practice the mutual exhortation and affirmation we bind ourselves to in other full communion agreements. But Cardinal Kasper's fine insight on the principle of differentiated consensus ought also to help us Lutherans be more mindful of ourselves, with our differentiated consensus (if it is that much) within that we do not recognize. We have our differing and differently ordered emphases in Lutheranism, even within the constellation of justification. Rome sees that we can treat them flatly, as if they are all of the same order. Surely in our own debates we do just that, and need not, as with the routine oppositions of justification and sanctification, for example, that ought not have much more life beyond Theology 101. On that example, I do demur from a Methodist colleague's estimation that the JD breakthrough meant that Roman Catholics and Lutherans each took a step toward Wesley. But I do believe that "differentiated consensus" will should be helpful for Lutheran from the ELCA, Missouri, Word Alone, Germany, Finland, Africa, and quite beyond. As a current leader refrains, "its hard work." No matter how theoretical, however, it is consequential, and well worth the work.

4. Acknowledging where most work can be done

The Cardinal said that we need not, we cannot, wait for Rome to do all the ecumenical work. Cardinal Kasper is a man of the people! I heartily respond, and I suspect you people of the people agree: if not Rome, then not Geneva or Chicago either. The Cardinal envisions a robust ecumenical life of the Spirit, the life of prayer-uttering, Bible-studying

and justice-making,...together. From this “reception” means more than agreement in formula and much more than the trickle-down from the theological and diplomatic dimensions. “Reception” will concern what theology does in view of the Spirit’s work in daily life; it will mean the reflection after the praxis. Formal theological consensus will mightily mean the reception of the Spirit’s convergences on the ground.

5. Acknowledging work that does not, at least officially, need to be done at all

This last point follows from the previous as well as from some central remarks Cardinal Kasper has said of the needs for future work on the doctrine of justification. I have a hunch that the JD will prove itself as more productive in real practice than the Lima agreement, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*. Time will tell. But I place my bet on this because of *focus*. Discovering the centrality of the doctrine of justification means for Cardinal Kasper that more real progress will be gained by strengthening and amplifying our fundamental agreement.

This is sage advice for post-JD life together. It is also sage advice for other ELCA ecumenical work. If *focus* on what is central to our theological understanding is most fruitful, then perhaps by attending to our primary “reason for being” we can in the ELCA avoid the agenda anxiety wrought by our almost innumerable formal ecumenical endeavors. Having learned from the JD how we can best advance (and we even see this in the excitement generated in the other denominations who have watched this develop between us and Rome), then we should the more tactically commit that the most promising venues for ecumenical renewal will be where common prayer, study, and care for neighbor can the most practicably happen. As Cardinal Kasper alludes, justification gives us such community, impels such practical life together, and compels justice. Official agreements give words to this. But

Unofficially, seminaries can teach to this, priests and pastors inspire to this, and the baptized faithful lead in this. Or, as the Cardinal also says, intense and intentional life together precedes reflection, and reflection presumes—and should the more presume—life.

Conclusion

If our formal, even diplomatic, conversations stay on point, and all of us concentrate especially with the Spirit “on the ground,” I do not believe we will have to wait so long for progress again like the JD, though it will not happen tomorrow, either. But I do hope that someday, soon, as with Cardinal Kasper’s closing generational allusion, my own grandchildren will see our walls come down, and that, with them and me (on the other side of mortality), the practical atheists of that day will join us all in praise of the one Lord who has brought us from darkness to light.