

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2 E. THE SACRAMENTS

Some pastoral guidelines for responsible communion practice

Adopted by the General Pastors Conference, 1990.

Edited August 2001.

INTRODUCTION

1. Scripture and Luther's Small Catechism teach that holy communion is 'the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ given with bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us to eat and drink'. The benefits of such eating and drinking are 'the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation'.

Every communicant, even an impenitent and unbelieving one, receives Christ's body and blood in this sacrament. But the benefits of the sacrament - forgiveness, life, and salvation — are received only by penitent believers who accept Christ's words and trust his promises expressed in the words of institution.

2. So the Lord's supper is a means of grace. It nourishes and strengthens God's people. The body and blood of Christ, given in and with the bread and wine, make the Lord's supper a precious gift, which believers receive joyfully and thankfully.
3. Such a precious gift should not be regarded lightly. The Apostle Paul warns against the sin of eating and drinking 'in an unworthy manner' (1 Cor 11:27–29). Those who administer the Lord's supper and those who receive it both have the responsibility of doing so only and always in a way which is in keeping with the nature of the sacrament.

RESPONSIBLE COMMUNION PRACTICE

4. Responsible celebration of the Lord's supper requires that we try to ensure that all who commune
 - a. are baptised and believe in the Triune God;

SOME PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE COMMUNION PRACTICE

- b. confess Christ as their only Saviour;
- c. repent of sin and seek to live in accordance with their confession of faith in Christ;
- d. confess the real presence in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins (1 Cor 10:16,17; 11:17–28).

Among such participants there is a 'communion' with Jesus and with one another when they gather at the Lord's table (Eph 4:3–6; 1 Cor 10:16,17).

5. Conversely, responsible celebration of the Lord's supper requires that we do not admit to the Lord's table people who
 - a. are not baptised or do not believe in the Triune God;
 - b. do not confess Christ as their only Saviour;
 - c. do not repent of sin and do not seek to live in accordance with the confession of faith in Christ;
 - d. do not confess the real presence in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins.

Such people would be in danger of receiving the supper in an unworthy manner, and so bringing God's judgment on themselves (1 Cor 11:29).

6. We believe that the Scriptures clearly indicate that in our stewardship of this precious sacrament which Christ has entrusted to his church, we are to follow the principles set out in paragraphs 4 and 5 above.

Up to this point, therefore, there should be uniformity of practice in the congregations of the Lutheran Church of Australia as they determine on the basis of paragraphs 4 and 5 who may or may not commune at their altars.

ALTAR FELLOWSHIP AND CONFESSION OF FAITH

7. However, there are further aspects which pastors and congregations, as stewards of this precious sacrament, must consider.

We believe that responsible administration of the Lord's supper requires not only that we obey the clear directions of Scripture (as summarised in paragraphs 4 and 5 of this document), but also that we take into account the teachings of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions concerning Christian fellowship.

In this area, however, there are issues that are not clear-cut. It is proper that we proceed with caution. We humbly and prayerfully submit ourselves to the Word of God. We recognise, however, that we are not given clear instructions which fit every situation. We are only pointed in a general direction. While we try to operate within general guidelines, we are always aware that the responsible decisions of pastors and congregations may vary from case to case.

8. According to Scripture, the celebration of the Lord's supper always involves an act of public confession of faith. The Lord's apostle writes: 'Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26). Those who commune together and proclaim the Lord's death together must be one in faith.

There will always be a question about the degree of agreement required in teaching and practice before holy communion can properly be celebrated together. The guidance which the Scriptures give is that (a) we should have nothing to do with any willful denial of the truth, and (b) we are to 'make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3). In addition to the God-given unity that is

SOME PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE COMMUNION PRACTICE

ours by virtue of our one baptism, one faith, and common confession of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in his supper, there is also the Spirit's gift of unity in doctrine. This unity is expressed most clearly in the celebration of the Lord's supper. Responsible administration of the Lord's supper means, therefore, that in addition to adhering to the principles stated in paragraphs 4 and 5 above, we make it our goal that all who commune together are one in the common confession of the cardinal evangelical teachings of the Scriptures.

9. Responsible communion practice includes refraining from taking part in any celebration of the sacrament which involves a denial of the gospel or of the nature and benefits of the Lord's supper, or which gives the impression of a fellowship which does not, in fact, exist. On these grounds, a Lutheran congregation may not be involved in a joint celebration of the Lord's supper with a congregation of another denomination. Nor should members of the Lutheran church commune in the church services of other denominations, when to do so would be seen as giving assent and support to teachings and/or practices which are contrary to the word of God and the doctrines of the Lutheran church (see *Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions* I, E7 – E9; A4 – A5; A32 – A35).

LUTHERAN ALTARS FOR LUTHERAN COMMUNICANTS ONLY?

10. A general guideline for responsible communion practice has been 'Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only'. This statement expresses the conviction that the participants who share a common body of Christian teaching are in the closest communion.

In practice, this statement means that, all things being as they should be, the pastor can welcome all Lutherans to the altar. He can assume that they are prepared in terms of repentance and faith; they confess what the true Lord's supper is; and they confess — and do not deny — the truth of God revealed in the Scriptures.

However, the pastor should continually instruct and advise his people concerning the proper reception of the sacrament (see Appendix).

11. In the past, the statement 'Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only' has meant that Christians from other denominations were automatically excluded from altars of the Lutheran Church of Australia.

We realise, however, that there is a growing number of situations where pastors and congregations are required to make responsible decisions concerning the communion attendance of individual non-Lutherans. Factors which need to be borne in mind in these situations include the following:

- The criteria which are used to decide the question of intercommunion between church bodies should not be used to decide the question of an individual's participation in the Lord's supper at a Lutheran altar.
- For many individual Christians, denominational affiliation does not have the same significance as it had in past generations. The fact that a person belongs to a particular denomination does not necessarily mean that he/she subscribes to all the teachings of that denomination. While it may be desirable that all would-be communicants at our altars share the church's understanding of church fellowship and Lutheran theology, we have no clear direction from Scripture that this is always an essential qualification for attendance at the Lord's table.

SOME PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE COMMUNION PRACTICE

12. Therefore, in certain situations it may be possible, on the basis of the principles outlined in paragraphs 4 and 5 above, to admit to Lutheran altars people who are not members of the Lutheran church. The pastor is responsible for the administration of the sacrament. He should find out the thinking and convictions of such intending communicants in terms of these principles. He is then in a position to advise for or against attendance.
 - 12.1 Sometimes it happens that the person who intends to commune represents, or is seen to represent, the public doctrine of a church with which the Lutheran Church of Australia is not in fellowship. Or perhaps this person intends to foster, or gives the impression of wanting to foster, ecumenical fellowship through participation in the sacrament at an altar of the Lutheran Church of Australia. In such a situation the pastor should advise the person concerned not to attend the Lord's table (see 'Theses on Joint Prayer and Worship', *DSTO I*, A4 – A5).
 - 12.2 However, it also sometimes happens that on special occasions or in particular circumstances a non-Lutheran worships in a Lutheran church and requests permission to commune. In such cases the pastor should satisfy himself that the intending communicant meets the criteria given in paragraphs 4 and 5 above. The pastor may then, in the exercise of pastoral care and concern, conclude that such a person should be permitted to commune. The pastor should inform the congregation — or at least the elders — as to who the person is and why he/she is communing with the congregation. Attendance at holy communion is not a private matter between the individual and God, but involves also all members of the congregation who are fellow-communicants.
13. The guidelines given in paragraph 12 above, which recognise that members of other churches may attend Lutheran altars in special situations and contexts, presuppose occasional and not regular participation.

Some people want to do something which seems to us to be contradictory: they want to attend Lutheran altars frequently and regularly. And yet they also wish to retain their membership in a non-Lutheran congregation. The pastor should lovingly and firmly help such people to see the apparent contradiction in their actions, and help them to resolve any inconsistencies.

IN CONCLUSION

14. We recognise that we are never capable of perfect stewardship of the precious sacrament which Christ has entrusted to his church. In our responsible administration of the sacrament we need always to guard against pride, self-righteousness, lovelessness, legalistic judging, and the like. In this, as in every other aspect of discipleship, we can live only by the grace of God, which pardons our wrong motives and imperfect decisions, and empowers us to be more faithful stewards, who seek only the glory of the Lord who gave his supper for the comfort and consolation of his people. Therefore, our fervent prayer will always be:

In these last days of sore distress,
grant us, O Lord, true steadfastness,
that pure we keep, till life is spent,
thy holy Word and sacrament.
(*Lutheran Hymnal 260 v2*)

APPENDIX

In the exercise of pastoral concern and oversight, the pastor advises people about their attendance or non-attendance at holy communion. The following questions should be kept in mind (see 1 John 1:8, 9; Matt 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19–20; 1 Cor 11:17–33; 1 Cor 10:16,17; Matt 5:23,24; 18:1–35):

Do the persons concerned

- a. see themselves as sinners, and do they repent of their sins and desire forgiveness from God?
- b. believe that God indeed forgives sins freely for Christ's sake on the basis of Christ's life, suffering, and death for all people?
- c. intend to live in obedience to the will of God?
- d. forgive those who have sinned against them, seek reconciliation with those whom they have offended, and desire to live in peace with all people?
- e. have faith that in holy communion Christ is present in a special way: in and with the bread and wine, Christ is present in his body and blood?
- f. believe that as the elements, accompanied by the word, are received in faith, forgiveness and eternal life are also received?
- g. recognise the oneness that exists with all those who are in Christ, and with all those who partake of holy communion, and does the person recognise their resultant responsibility to be considerate toward other members of the body?