

Lutheran Church of Australia: Commission on Worship

STATEMENT 32

THE CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER WITH THANKSGIVING

Adopted by the Commission on Worship, February 1995. The statement was prepared by the Department of Liturgics.

Reformatted and revised: 6 May 1998

- 1 Increasingly, the Lord's supper is being celebrated without the traditional preface and thanksgiving or any form of thanksgiving.
 - a. The words of institution are recited either after the sermon, or after the prayer of the church, or after some didactic sentences about the significance of the sacrament, or after an admonition about its proper reception.
 - b. The preface with the thanksgiving, the holy, holy, holy, the Lord's Prayer before or after the words of institution, and the Lamb of God are omitted from the celebration of the sacrament.
 - c. It is argued that, since the words of institution effect the real presence, all other parts of the traditional orders have the status of adiaphora.
- 2 We maintain that since thanksgiving is commanded by Christ, it is not a matter of adiaphoron, but should be observed in the celebration of the sacrament.
 - a. The words and form of the thanksgiving are not specifically prescribed by our Lord. Nevertheless the evidence clearly indicates that Christ's command to 'do this' in remembrance of him (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24,25) includes the act of thanksgiving over the bread and the wine (Matt 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19,20; 1 Cor 11:23–25).
 - The gospels indicate that the thanksgiving of Jesus at the last supper is similar to the prayers of blessing and thanksgiving said by Jesus in the meals where he acted as host with his disciples (Matt 14:19; 15:36; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; 24:30; John 6:11; cf Acts 27:35).
 - By doing this Jesus did not establish something completely new, but acted according to the Jewish custom of acknowledging Yahweh as the source of every blessing before a meal and of giving thanks to him for his blessings at the end of each meal.
 - These prayers were called 'benedictions' or 'eulogies' since they normally began with the formula: 'Blessed are you, Adonai'. This is followed by relative clauses which listed the mighty acts of God in creating the world and providing food for humankind. They are therefore acts of praise addressed to God. This custom may be behind the use of the Greek verb for 'blessing' with reference to the bread in Matthew 26:26 and Mark 14:22 (cf 1 Cor 10:16).

- The variation in Matthew and Mark between the 'blessing' with the bread and the 'thanksgiving' with the wine probably reflects the different wording in the Jewish tradition for the benedictory grace with the bread at the beginning of the meal and the thanksgiving with the wine at the end of the meal.
 - The words of thanksgiving are the first in a sequence of acts to be performed in the celebration of the Lord's supper. The four accounts given of the institution of the sacrament all report the act of thanksgiving with a Greek aorist participle rather than an aorist indicative tense, as in the case of most of the other acts. This may be taken in one of two ways. It may indicate that the customary words of thanksgiving were spoken before the rest of the rite was performed, ie it was the first in a series of acts; or it may indicate that the rite not only began with the words of thanksgiving but that the thanksgiving accompanied some or all of the subsequent acts, including the words of Christ for the bread and the wine. These two alternatives in the understanding of the extent of the thanksgiving are evident in the difference between the Service with Communion and the Service — Alternative Form. But either way, the thanksgiving, according to all New Testament accounts, is an essential part of the celebration.
- b. Just as Jesus addressed the thanksgiving to his Father, so the eucharistic thanksgiving is addressed to the first person of the holy Trinity.
- Just as the Father is the source of everything we receive in worship, so all prayer is offered to him in the Lord's supper.
 - In the eucharistic prayer Jesus leads us in our thanksgiving to the Father for his gifts in creation and redemption.
- 3 The apostolic fathers testify unanimously to the celebration of the Lord's supper with thanksgiving.
- a. In his *Letter to the Smyrneans* Ignatius refers to the Lord's supper as the eucharist (7:1; 8:1).
- b. The *Didache* calls it the 'eucharist' (9:2,5), mentions the giving of thanks with the breaking of the bread (14:1), and gives prayers of thanksgiving for the cup and the bread (9:1–5) as well as a post-communion prayer of thanksgiving (10:1–6).
- c. Justin also calls it the eucharist (1 Apol 66), mentions the offering of praise and thanksgiving to the Father (65,67), and refers to the consecrated elements as 'eucharisted food' (66).
- 4 Our Lutheran Confessions associate the sacrament of the altar with the performance of thanksgiving.
- a. Since the preliminary act of thanksgiving was not a matter of contention at that time, the Formula of Concord did not discuss it but merely assumed that the words of institution would be accompanied by thanksgiving.
- The Formula of Concord seems at times to limit the act of consecration to the mere recital of the words of institution (FC Ep VII, 9; FC SD VII, 82,83). However, it thereby takes the essential part of the act to refer to the whole of it, for the Latin text speaks in 84 about the consecration of the elements with a 'blessing' (*benedictione*).

- It also quotes the words of Justin with approval where he maintains that the food of the sacrament has been consecrated (Latin) or blessed (German) by Christ through word and *prayer* (FC SD VII, 39).
 - Both the Latin and the German text regularly refer to the consecrated elements as the 'blessed' bread and wine (FC SD VII, 44, 52, 56, 57, 63, 75, 83, 86, 126).
- b. The importance of thanksgiving is evident in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, which refers to the sacrament as the 'eucharist' (Apol XXIV, 66, 67, 76, 87; cf AC XXII, 6; XXIV, 12), and teaches that it is our true sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise to God (Apol XXIV, 19, 30–33, 35, 74–77).
 - c. Even though the Confessions hold that the words of institution constitute the real presence of Christ's body and blood, they still seem to envisage that they would be preceded by words of thanksgiving and prayer.
- 5 Liturgically speaking, the thanksgiving functions as an important part of the whole sequence of acts in the liturgy from the preface to the Lord's Prayer. These acts prepare for the words of institution and so contribute something significant to the right administration and celebration of the sacrament.
- a. The initial greeting invokes and acknowledges the Lord Jesus as the host and celebrant of the sacrament.
 - b. The thanksgiving not only fulfils Christ's command to celebrate the sacrament with thanksgiving, but also joins the congregation with him in addressing his holy Father in the act of thanksgiving on behalf of the church and the world (cf 1 Tim 2:1). It also reveals the messianic significance of the Lord's supper, for, as the faithful receive the body and blood of the promised Messiah with thanksgiving, they also already in this age celebrate the life of the age to come.
 - c. The holy, holy, holy not only joins the eucharistic celebration of the congregation with the adoration of all the saints and angels before the very throne of God, but also expresses the eschatological character of the sacrament as a foretaste of eternal life with God.
 - d. The 'Blessed is he' acknowledges the advent and presence of the promised Messiah in the sacrament. It comes from Psalm 118:26, the culmination of Psalms 113–118, which constitute the Egyptian Hallel sung by Jesus and his disciples at the last supper (Matt 26:30; Mark 14:26).
 - e. In the absence of another eucharistic prayer, the Lord's Prayer has traditionally functioned as the eucharistic prayer in the Lutheran liturgy. By it we join with Jesus in interceding for the church and the world in the celebration of the sacrament. Since, according to Paul in 1 Timothy 4:5, all things are consecrated by the word of God and prayer, it has been understood by some Lutherans as the prayer for the consecration of the elements.

- f. All these acts, from the greeting to the Lord's Prayer, therefore, join the people of God with Christ in the performance of the heavenly liturgy. He not only serves them sacramentally as the victim, but also ministers sacrificially as their great high priest who leads them in their service of thanksgiving, adoration, praise, and intercession.
 - g. While the wording of these acts may vary from time to time and place to place, the words of institution are recited in the context of Christ's own ecumenical, eschatological ministry of intercession and praise.
- 6 Therefore some form of thanksgiving and praise to God the Father should normally be spoken or sung in connection with the words of institution in every public celebration of the sacrament by pastors of the Lutheran Church of Australia.