

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2

G. INTERDENOMINATIONAL COOPERATION – CHURCH MOVEMENTS

Guidelines for participants in cross-denominational or non-denominational bible study groups

Adopted by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations, March 1993.

Edited September 2001.

THE BACKGROUND

1. Traditional denominational, ethnic and subcultural barriers are coming down. Lutheran lay people are joining with other Christians in a wide range of activities.
2. Such inter-denominational interaction includes joint Bible study and prayer. Sometimes these studies are organised by people from other denominations. Sometimes they are organised by freelance groups who claim to be non-denominational, purely Bible-based, and therefore without denominational prejudice.
3. There is also a growing use of a variety of Bible translations and study materials and literature produced by different publishers and authors. These are said to be non-denominational in approach.
4. This situation raises concern about the nature of what is being studied and what is being communicated through such studies under the guise of denominational neutrality. The concern is whether what is being taught is genuinely biblical and, therefore, whether the gospel is being rightly taught in its fullness.

THE ASSUMPTIONS

5. The assumptions behind participation in such cross-denominational or non-denominational activities, or the use of such materials, include the following:
 - there is much that is common to all Christians
 - what is common belongs to the core or essence of the gospel

GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANTS IN CROSS-DENOMINATIONAL OR NON-DENOMINATIONAL BIBLE STUDY GROUPS

- denominational differences belong to the periphery of the Christian faith
- the Bible belongs to the common core; any study of the Bible is therefore by its very nature a non-denominational activity
- getting away from denominational emphases is a good thing

THE REALITY

6. There is no such thing as a non-denominational method or approach to the study of the Bible. When the theological presuppositions, interpretations, and applications of those who claim to be non-denominational are examined, they are usually found to belong to one particular theological family group or another.
7. Specific denominational theological emphases may not, and, in some cases, certainly do not belong to the periphery of the Christian faith. Rather, they impinge on the very heart of the gospel. Hence they deal with fundamental issues.
8. One such fundamental issue is how God's salvation is given to the sinner. There may be agreement on who Jesus is and what salvation is. But when it comes to the bestowal of that salvation, that is, how Christ and the sinner are brought together, there may be fundamental differences.
9. The central message of the Scriptures is that salvation is conferred or bestowed by grace alone, for the sake of Christ alone, by God's action alone (that is, by word and sacraments), through faith alone. To understand that this is the central message of the Scriptures is to have a right understanding of the Scriptures as a whole. It keeps the interpretation of the individual parts of Scripture correctly focused.
10. Some may claim that they teach that salvation is by grace alone through Christ alone. But when it comes to the crucial question of how salvation becomes actual or real for the individual sinner, an answer fundamentally different to the one above is sometimes given, namely, that salvation is actualised by the sinner's act of will or decision or surrender.
11. Thus, when it comes to the crucial point, salvation is made dependent upon some form of human spiritual or moral action. This is not a right understanding of the Scriptures. It fails to distinguish between the law (what God requires of us) and the gospel (what God does for us). It therefore diminishes Christ and the comfort of the gospel.

EXAMPLES

12. The differences can best be explained by highlighting a few expressions or formulations commonly found in such theological family groups, and then contrasting them with the correct biblical and gospel-centred expressions. They will be categorised as 'A' and 'B'.

Note: In making these two contrasting categories we do not intend to imply that all statements in category A are necessarily unscriptural or wrong in themselves. It all depends on the context and the way they are used in teaching.

For example, when applied to the area of sanctification, that is, how we are called to live as Christians in response to the gospel, some of the Category A statements are true to Scripture. In this context they function as law rightly applied and correctly distinguished from the gospel. But when they are applied to the gospel-action of

GUIDELINES FOR PARTICIPANTS IN CROSS-DENOMINATIONAL
OR NON-DENOMINATIONAL BIBLE STUDY GROUPS

salvation, they are not a correct interpretation of Scripture because they confuse law and gospel.

Category A

Category B

Open your heart to Jesus.

God has opened his heart to you in Jesus.

Accept Jesus as your Saviour.

Your Saviour has accepted you; believe it! (addressed to the baptised).

OR

Your Saviour is ready to accept you through baptism (addressed to the unbaptised).

Make your decision for Jesus.

Jesus has made his decision for you. He is for you, not against you.

Surrender your will to the Lord.

The Lord has surrendered his will to the Father in perfect obedience for you.

I have made Jesus my Lord by committing myself to him.

Jesus has made himself my Lord by committing himself to me.

Is your heart filled with the joy of the Lord?

What counts is the joy the Lord has in his heart for you.

COMMENTS

13. In these examples, the category A statements focus on us and our action. The category B statements focus on God's actions.

14. The category A statements are grounded in a theology which centres on the sovereign will of God and on surrender to that will as the way of salvation.

Category B statements centre on the grace of God communicated to the individual through word and sacrament, and received by faith. When category B theology speaks of the will of God it does so primarily in terms of God's will to save.

15. Category A theology, because it sees the completing of the act of salvation as an act of will or surrender or acceptance by the sinner, has little place for the biblical understanding of the sacraments. Generally speaking it rejects infant baptism.

In category B theology, it is infant baptism which above all becomes a touchstone of whether one understands that salvation is totally God's action and not ours.

16. In category A theology, baptism and the Lord's supper are seen as public confessions or demonstrations of our commitment to Christ. In category B theology, the sacraments are God's actions involving God's total commitment to us.

THEREFORE:

17. Members who participate in common Bible study activities with other Christians are encouraged to use their pastor as adviser and guide.
18. Pastors need to be aware of such participation and the theological leanings and emphases of the studies.
19. Members need to be critically aware of theological approaches and presuppositions which are alien to the gospel. When participants become aware of such things, they can make significant contributions to such study activities by providing true gospel-centred guidance.
20. Where such guidance is consistently rejected or over-ridden, members should consider withdrawing from the group. Such actions do not mean that they cannot learn from others, or that their own presuppositions are always as gospel-centred as they ought to be, or that they are concerned only for the preservation of denominational Lutheranism. Their concern is to see that all study activities focus on the Christ-for-us who is the centre of the Scriptures.