

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 2 E. THE SACRAMENTS

The service with holy communion for ministry to those who are sick

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The ministry of our Lord is continued in the church through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. This ministry includes both proclamation and healing (Luke 9:1–2).

The work of healing by the power of the Holy Spirit affects a person's body and mind as well as their soul and spirit. It aims at the total health of a person. It is true, total healing is only fully accomplished at the resurrection (Rom 8:23). Nevertheless, such healing is already provisionally and partially shown in this life. Luther refers to this total healing in his teaching on the Lord's Supper. He says, for example: 'Where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation' (Small Catechism V.6). In the New Testament, the word for 'salvation' includes physical (Matt 9:21–22) and mental healing (Luke 8:36), as well as forgiveness (Matt 1:21) and spiritual health (Mark 16:16).

Healing is therefore an important part of Christian worship, where Christ undoes the damage done by Satan (Mark 1:21–28; Luke 13:10–17). In every service our risen Lord comes to heal his people in some way, beginning with their washing and rebirth in baptism.

Unfortunately, preaching and practice has often ignored the fact that in worship the Lord comes to heal his people. Some Pentecostal groups place a special emphasis on physical healing – dissociated, however, from other kinds of healing as well as from the preached gospel and the sacraments. This one-sided emphasis challenges us to rediscover in our worship the importance of healing in the wider sense, and to appreciate those parts of our liturgy which have to do with healing.

1. THE SERVICE WITH HOLY COMMUNION: ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR HEALING

Various parts of our liturgy touch on the healing ministry of the risen Lord in our worship. Of these, the following are most important for us as Lutherans:

a. **Confession and absolution**

Just as guilt from sin can lead to mental and physical sickness, so forgiveness from God results in spiritual healing which can in turn promote mental and physical health (Psalm 32:105; Matt 9:1–8; James 5:16). Confession and absolution are therefore an important part of the church's public ministry to people who are sick. This is demonstrated by the choice of Psalm 51:1–9 and Psalm 103:1–5 for use in the 'Order for Confession and Absolution'.

b. **Thanksgiving and praise**

As the preface to the 'Holy, holy, holy' affirms, it is 'salutary' or 'healthy' to thank and praise our heavenly Father. Such praise not only flows from our healing by God, but it also in some mysterious way results in our healing, because we human beings were made for the glory of God. Peace, in the full biblical sense of the word, comes to us as we give glory to our heavenly Father through his beloved Son Jesus Christ, as we do when we sing the 'Glory to God in the highest'. Spiritual, mental, and even physical healing can therefore either begin or be completed when a person turns in faith from self-centred misery to Godcentred praise.

c. **Preaching**

Preaching plays a decisive role in the healing ministry of the church, for through his word Christ offers people his health and salvation. Just as Christ healed sick people with his effectual word, so the proper proclamation of law and gospel brings healing in the full biblical sense to the faithful. Paul, in his pastoral letters, speaks about 'sound' or 'healing' doctrine (1 Tim 1:10; 2 Tim 4:3), and words (1 Tim 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13). Paul speaks this way because such preaching produces a pure heart (1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 2:22) and a clear conscience (1 Tim 1:5; 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3), and so brings healing to those who receive it.

But Christ needs to be proclaimed as the good physician also for those who are physically and mentally sick. The gospel stories which tell of Christ's ministry to the sick should be used not only to teach about healing but also to preach healing to the sick.

d. **Intercession**

It is generally agreed that this part of worship touches most directly on healing. The gospels relate how the relatives and friends of those who were sick either brought them to Jesus (for example, Matt 9:1–8; Mark 7:31–37; 8:22–25) or else came to Jesus on their behalf (for example, Matt 8:5–13; 9:18–26; 15:21–28). In similar fashion, the congregation should pray in the Prayer of the Church for the healing of the sick (James 5:16). By its intercession the church most obviously exercises its public ministry to those who are sick.

e. **The Lord's supper**

As Lutherans we place the Lord's supper at the centre of our ministry to the sick. If the desecration of Christ's body and blood can lead to sickness and death (see 1 Cor 11:30), it follows that its proper use brings healing and life (compare John

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6:54). Luther therefore rightly describes this sacrament as 'an entirely wholesome, soothing medicine which helps you and gives life to your body and soul' (Large Catechism V.68).

This aspect of the Lord's supper is emphasised at two points in the liturgy. First, the words of the dismissal after the Lord's supper affirm that the reception of Christ's body and blood is for the benefit of the body as well as the soul. It would therefore be good if this reference were not omitted, as it is all too often. Secondly, the prayer of thanksgiving after communion calls the Lord's supper a 'healing' or 'salutary' gift. Christ's body is therefore given to us in holy communion for the healing of our bodies.

f. **The blessings**

The various benedictions and greetings in the service are words which do what they say, that is, they actually convey the blessing of the Triune God. This blessing from God promotes the physical and spiritual life and health of the believer. Two blessings touch, in part, on the matter of healing: (1) the 'peace' after the words of institution and (2) the words of the dismissal after the distribution. By their association with Christ's body and blood they offer peace and therefore health to all aspects of a person's life.

2. THE CORPORATE USE OF THE SERVICE WITH HOLY COMMUNION FOR MINISTRY TO SICK PEOPLE

The ministry of healing for those who are sick may be promoted liturgically in the following ways:

- a. In the Prayer of the Church the congregation normally prays for the healing of those who are sick. This could be highlighted and made more personal than is usually done. The minister could mention by name those who are sick (if asked to do so), and even have them come forward to lay hands on them as he prays for them (Mark 16:18; Acts 28:8, compare Mark 6:5).
- b. In the Prayer of the Church, thanksgiving may be offered for those who have recovered from sickness, just as prayers of thanksgiving have traditionally been offered after the birth of a child. In this way those who had been physically isolated from the worshipping congregation would be restored to it once again (compare Psalm 30; Psalm 107:17–22).
- c. On certain occasions an opportunity may be provided for those who want to do so, to come forward to receive individual absolution and perhaps also a blessing from the minister with the laying on of hands after the general confession of sins (Mark 10:16).

3. INDIVIDUAL USE OF THE SERVICE WITH HOLY COMMUNION FOR PEOPLE SEEKING HEALING

Apart from any special liturgical provisions, people can seek healing at any service in the following manner:

- a. Those who are sick and yet physically able can attend worship and seek healing for themselves.
- b. People can also come to the Lord's supper for healing. This should be encouraged as the normal means for believers to receive help and health from God.

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- c. Members of the church can be taught to pray during the service for those whom they know to be sick, and to bring them to their Lord as they attend the Lord's supper. This practice has been a part of Christian piety since the time of the early church. By such personal intercession for the sick at holy communion, Christians exercise their royal priesthood and as believers in Jesus Christ they use their faith for the benefit of the sick, just as the friends of the crippled man did in Matthew 9:1–8 (see especially 9:2).