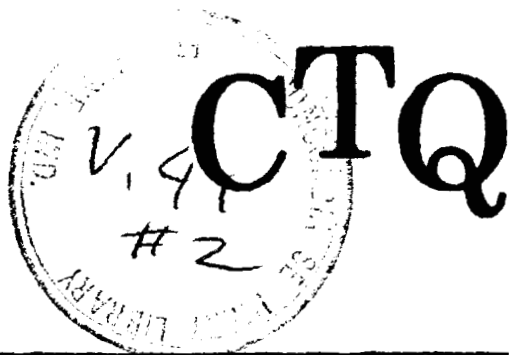


CONCORDIA
THEOLOGICAL
QUARTERLY

Volume 41 Number 2



RECEIVED
APR 12 1977

APRIL 1977

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The Statement on Communion Practices: A Critical Appraisal

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Communion practices and the problem of Communion fellowship have been serious concerns of late among Lutheran thinkers throughout the world. At opposite extremes have stood thinkers such as Elert and Sasse¹ with their primary concern for scriptural and confessional integrity, and the proponents of widened fellowship² at the other. The Statement on Communion Practices, first made available to members of the American Lutheran Church who had requested it in May 1976 and offered for adoption at the July 1976 general convention of the Lutheran Church in America and the October 1976 convention of the ALC, encountered strong opposition. Obviously, the Statement had been hastily assembled and was pushed ahead so rapidly that adequate discussion was precluded, it being impossible for evaluations to be written and ready for the deadline of scholarly journals. Had the Statement been accepted by either convention without adequate investigation, or in spite of better knowledge, or even out of indifference to the issues involved, it would have been a serious discredit to the church. The Statement was presented before both LCA and ALC conventions, where it evoked strong criticism, but received a certain tentative approval before being returned to the relevant committee for revisions. The issues have not been widely enough discussed. They also involve the Missouri Synod which is in fellowship with the ALC. The following article provides generous quotations from the Statement since it has not been widely circulated. Originally appearing before the small readership of the *Concordia Review* (July 1976), it is now offered to the wider circulation of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*.

ITS UNDERLYING DOCTRINAL PROPOSITIONS

We quote from the Preface:

The committee desired to outline a theological position and recommend practices which are consistent with and faithful to the biblical testimony and the witness of the Lutheran Confessions and which are also

enriched by the ecumenical insights now shared through open and appreciative contact with other members of the Body of Christ.

It is laudable that the Committee stated its purpose thus; both the LCA and the ALC, as confessional Lutheran bodies, are morally and legally bound to this basis. Scripture is the primary norm; but since most denominations claim its support, Lutherans regard their Confessions as a needful definition of their understanding of Biblical teachings. Likewise, such a statement must show what has been learned from the ecumenical encounters of recent years. Lutheranism has been ecumenically concerned from its beginnings.

What is meant by the word "ecumenical"? Derived from *oikoumene*, Greek for "the inhabited world," it refers to the Christian Church as a whole. The ecumenical church is seen in both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. Vertically, we become mindful of our fellowship with the Church through the ages. In terms of persons, this includes Christ and the apostles, the martyrs, confessors, and teachers; one thinks of Paul, Augustine, Luther, Gerhardt, and others. In terms of the faith professed, this includes Scripture, the creeds, liturgies, devotional materials, theological expressions, great works of art, and the Confessions. Horizontally, we treasure the Church as the Body of Christ in our own day: first, our brethren in world Lutheranism and, secondly, our brethren in other Christian denominations. A sort of "confessional" school among Lutherans insists that our best contribution is given to other denominations when we study our own heritage and share its riches with others while remaining strictly loyal to Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. They stress honest dialogue. Truth is more important than administrative union or unionistic fellowship. Over against this group (Elert, Sasse, Kinder, Flesner, *et al.*) stand those who hold to a sort of "melting-pot" position. They feel that the horizontal aspect needs more emphasis. They consider it regrettable that doctrinal differences have hindered church-fellowship. Since doctrinal unity is difficult, we should establish fellowship first, and let theological agreement come later. It is obvious that although the former view was espoused at the time that the LCA and the ALC became involved in the ecumenical movement, present trends are toward unionism. The Statement which is before us tries to expand the horizontal experience of ecumenicity in its unsuccessful attempt at the same time to remain true to historic Lutheranism.

The Statement grapples with the question of the central doctrine behind the Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion. We might have expected its authors to have selected

the right distinction of Law and Gospel, Christology, or the Means of Grace. To our surprise they have bypassed these Lutheran insights to undergird their position with the Covenant-Theology of another tradition:

The theme of the covenant is central to the biblical understanding of the people of God. It describes the relationship of election between God and his chosen people. God's interventions in human history have had the object of forming, out of common and fallen humanity, a covenant community, a people who are his own. In the fullness of time the covenant was renewed through Jesus the Christ and through his Holy Spirit given to the church. The new covenant (Jer. 31:31ff) established in the ministry of our Lord and ratified by his self-offering (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24), is now ours—announced in the proclamation of God's Word, experienced in the sacraments and in the church, and witnessed to in the Christian life.

This is the characteristic theology of the Reformed tradition, reaching back past Coccejus over Ursinus and Bullinger to Calvin and Zwingli.³ Space will not permit us to debate this concept here, or to show how it conflicts with the Lutheran understanding of Law and Gospel and with Lutheran theology as a whole.⁴ Nevertheless, the Statement has attempted to base a discussion of Lutheran Communion practices upon such a doctrinal construction. The next step was to derive an appropriate doctrine of the Church out of the Covenant-theology: the Church as "covenant community," as the elect. Such an ecclesiology scarcely harmonizes with the Lutheran insight that the Church is the Body of Christ into which the believer was incorporated through Baptism. Furthermore, since a covenant requires two parties for actuation, Covenant-theology is the traditional support for the Calvinist insistence that receiving Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar is dependent upon the faith of the individual; but this all stands in unresolvable tension with the Lutheran view of the objective presence of Christ which leads to the insistence that also unbelievers receive the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, to their condemnation (*communicatio indignorum*).

ITS UNDERSTANDING OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Confessional Lutheran theology of the Lord's Supper has stressed three points: the body and blood of Christ are united with the elements of bread and wine (*unio sacramentalis*), the body and blood of Christ are therefore actually eaten by every communicant (*communio oratus*), and, consequently, those who are unworthy and unprepared also receive the true body and

blood of Christ, but unto judgment (*communicatio indignorum seu impiorum*). None of these points is developed in the Statement. Nowhere does it say that the body and blood are given; it only speaks of the "presence" of Christ. In the section on Intercommunion it asks "That the Real Presence of Christ in the sacramental elements be publicly affirmed" (p. 5). What is meant by that vague expression "Real Presence"? Certainly Calvin could have agreed to the use of that term under his concept of a spiritual presence of Christ, but he rejected the doctrine that the body and blood are given in, with, and under the bread and wine. The closest thing to an explanation of what is given in the sacrament are these words of the Statement:

The Lutheran Confessions uphold the reality of Christ's presence in the sacramental bread and wine in order to affirm by these means his saving work for us. The Sacrament is essentially a gift from God to his people through which the crucified and risen Christ is present and active to forgive, to save, to unite, to give life, to comfort and to strengthen us for the work to which he calls us in the world.

It is hard to believe that the committee expected four million Lutherans to accept this as a statement of their beliefs; one could change the second word to "Protestant" without otherwise altering the sentence in any way! The notion that the sacrament is a sign or affirmation of a salvation otherwise attained is characteristic of the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century, but is explicitly rejected as inadequate in the Formula of Concord (Ep. VII, 6-9; SD VII, 115-118).

This leads us to another question: What position does the Statement take regarding the doctrines rejected by the Confessions? After asserting that the body and blood of Christ are handed out, the Augsburg Confession concludes: "The contrary doctrine is therefore rejected" (X). In the formula, not only are the views of the Reformed bluntly rejected (BS, pp. 1011-1016; BC, pp. 589-591), but also the confessors repeat the words of Luther which deny that the Reformed have a genuine Holy Communion (SD VII, 22, 32) and conclude: ". . . Those who will not believe that the bread of the Lord in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receives orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints—whoever, I say, will not believe this should let me alone and not hope to have fellowship with me. This cannot be changed" (33). Were the writers of the Statement aware of this clear-cut position when they advanced the claim that their stand was "consistent with and faithful to . . . the witness of the Lutheran Confessions" (p. 1)? Now that this has been pointed out, will it not be necessary either for them to reject Communion fellowship with those churches

repudiated above, or else to come out clearly and say that they are rejecting the teachings of the Lutheran Confessions?

Like several liturgical productions of recent years, the Statement tends to confuse the direction from which the essential action in the Lord's Supper proceeds. Is it something that God does for us or that we do for him? The Statement seems to regard not the divine gift but some human attitude as constitutive in the following words:

Because of the saving love of God in Christ which is conveyed in this Sacrament the language and spirit of the whole service of Holy Communion is one of thanksgiving (eucharistia). This thanksgiving is a remembrance of the mighty acts of God in Christ and an anticipation of the fulfillment of all things in the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit causes this remembrance and anticipation to become personal in the memory and hope of the covenant community and gives a foretaste of the feast to come.

The last sentence is grammatically and logically faulty: how can the memory and hope of "the covenant community," a group, be "personal"?

The above quotations from the Statement apparently want to describe the benefits of Communion: ". . . to forgive, to save, to unite [with whom—God or man?], go give life, to comfort, and to strengthen us for work . . ." It "brings into focus the common life of the covenant community, and propels . . . to engage in mission . . ." The first group of benefits is, on the whole, in accord with Scripture; the latter remarks about the "common life" and "mission" do not go back to Christ, but were invented by the committee. It may be desirable at times to prod members into more energetic support of the institutional church, but the attempt is out of place in this context. Before we leave this section of the Statement, one further correction is in order; the words, "This do for my remembrance," should not be ascribed to "FC, SD, VII, 83-84," but to 1 Corinthians 11:24.

PARTICIPATION IN HOLY COMMUNION

We now proceed to Part II of the Statement, Recommendations for Practice. Contrary to common opinion, the Iowa Synod rejected the Galesburg Rule as unionistic, thereby virtually ending merger discussions with the conservative General Council. In the preparations for the 1960 merger, the antecedents of the ALC approved the Minneapolis Theses with their commitment to close-communion, i.e., that only individuals who have been properly instructed are admitted to the sacrament. The 1968 ALC Statement was an unwarranted

departure from such confessional practices; the Statement of 1976 goes much further. It condones intercommunion with those whom our Confessions have repudiated, and urges Lutherans to go out of their way to admit participants from those who reject our position. It claims to be true to the Confessions, and yet urges communion with those who are therein said to have falsified the Scriptures in their teaching.

Note for example this paragraph of the Statement on Communion Practices on who may participate in Lutheran celebrations of the Sacrament:

Holy Communion is the covenant meal of the new people of God who are called to be the body of Christ in the world. Only those incorporated into this body, the church, by Holy Baptism may participate in the Sacrament of the Altar. Whenever the Sacrament is celebrated it should be open to all communing Christians present.

If the Covenant-theology were a suitable framework for a Lutheran doctrine of the Sacrament, if the Church were properly described as the "covenant-community," and the Lord's Supper well characterized as a "covenant-meal," it would seem inescapable that all persons who have at least voluntarily assumed their part of the covenant together with God should be eligible to attend Lutheran Communion. This is what the above paragraph evidently wants to say. However, each of those premises is wrong, and therefore the conclusion is also wrong. Furthermore, the paragraph is grammatically and logically unclear. The Covenant-idea had been injected into later Calvinistic thought in order to soften the effects of predestination and to increase the responsibility of the elect individual. The Covenant was seen as between two persons, God and the elect. The first clause of the above paragraph is consistent with this thought, as is also the last sentence; but the rest stands in tension. It is not that those who have made the covenant with God are now called to be the body of Christ, but rather, those who were not the people of God have been made His people, His body, by the means of Baptism. Unlike Reformed thought, Lutheran theology holds that only those who have been baptized have been regenerated. This is stated clearly in the second sentence, which is correct so far as it goes. The last sentence is a truism; obviously, those Christians who commune are communing Christians. But the Statement doubtless means to say that all Christians allowed to commune in other churches, orthodox or heterodox, should be regarded as eligible for Communion at Lutheran altars.

Such an interpretation of this unclear sentence seems justified by the section on Intercommunion, page 5:

The practice of intercommunion among Lutherans at home and abroad is encouraged.

Participation as a visitor in non-Lutheran congregations, proper because of the universal nature of the church, places one in the role of guest. As a visitor one should respect the prevailing practice of hospitality. On such occasions and at ecumenical gatherings, in parish and nonparish settings, both pastoral and lay participation as communicants is a matter of personal judgment.

Such judgment should be informed by the following considerations:

- a. That the participants be baptized Christians;
- b. That the Real Presence of Christ in the sacramental elements be publicly affirmed;
- c. That the Sacrament be celebrated as a Means of Grace;
- d. That the Words of Institution be proclaimed; and
- e. That the elements associated with our Lord's institution be used.

For Lutheran clergy to be involved as presiding or assisting ministers in the celebration of Holy Communion in other churches, a reciprocal relationship between the clergy involved should prevail.

With the best construction put on it, it is impossible to say that the above quotation is "consistent with and faithful to the biblical testimony and the witness of the Lutheran Confessions" (Preface).

In addition to the arguments against intercommunion already advanced, let us examine Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: "And unto true unity of the Church it is sufficient to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and concerning the administration of the sacraments." These words have often been appealed to loosely as endorsing doctrinal minimalism; Lutherans can have fellowship with the Reformed so long as they can agree that Christ is Lord and is somehow present at the Supper. This is a grievous distortion, however, when we consider this statement in its context: (1) It was addressed to Roman Catholics alone—Emperor Charles V, his retinue, and representatives of the papal church. The Reformed were explicitly excluded at Augsburg, following Luther's rejection of Zwingli's Neo-Platonic interpretation of the Lord's Supper at Marburg. (2) The "conservative reformation" concept of retaining ceremonies not forbidden by Scripture was addressed to the Roman, not the Zwinglian, party; matters such as the use of Latin, the elevation, candles, and vestments should not

separate us if we can agree on the essentials. (3) However, there can be no compromise on the preaching of the Gospel and on the Sacraments. Now, in spite of the earnest discussions between Lutheran and Reformed, one still gets the impression that the agreement which some have proclaimed is not genuine. It is natural enough when a person is placed on a committee which is supposed to reach a consensus that, in accord with the American obsession for success, he makes concessions until an "agreement" has been reached. However, a book such as *Marburg Revisited*² manifests both a lack of skill in questions of systematic theology and a naive misunderstanding of the historical problems (manifested in the title!) which betray the unfinished task. No doubt one of the reasons for the weakness of the Statement which we are appraising is the inadequacy of its forerunners.

Perhaps one of the reasons why a concerted effort has been underway to minimize confirmation has been the unauthorized practice of open communion. A Lutheran pastor in the eastern states once lamented to me that he admitted Methodists to the Lord's table, but his own unconfirmed youth could not attend. Abolishing catechetical instruction and confirmation as the requirement for eligibility, although it met much resistance from stubborn "conservatives," seemed the easier route toward intercommunion. But the problem is still not solved, at least in the Statement. In an age when we have given our children everything—material objects, early sex, an equal voice in adult decision-making within society, and early communion without requiring confirmation instruction, the youngsters are still not equal to the outsiders. Note these two paragraphs from the section of the Statement on "Admission," page 3:

Admission to the Sacrament is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the church to those who are baptized. It is the practice of the church to admit to Holy Communion those who, in its judgment, are ready to participate. Such participation need not be tied to intellectual attainment. The decision regarding readiness should be informed by the following guidelines, which are consistent with our confessions:

- a. That there be a simple trust that the Risen Lord is here giving himself to his people;
- b. That there be a basic understanding and appreciation of the nature and benefits of the Sacrament;
- c. That there be an acceptance of one's place as a communicant in the fellowship of believers, and;
- d. That there be self-examination in a manner appropriate to the level of maturity and recognition of the need of forgiveness.

There may be special concern for the admission of children. The findings of the Joint Commission on Theology and Practice of Confirmation indicate that readiness to participate normally occurs at age ten or the level of fifth grade, but it may occur earlier or later. The responsibility for deciding when to admit a child is shared by the pastor, the child, the family or sponsoring persons, and the congregation.

After asserting that admission is "by invitation of the Lord", the next sentence interposes the "judgment" of the institutional church to determine "readiness" of children. The "invitation of the Lord" is further limited by four "guidelines," determined by the committee, of course, in supposed line with the Confessions. The third guideline appears to be the demand of submission to the institutional church; if so, this legalism is unwarranted. Missing is a simple statement that admission is contingent upon a knowledge of the Small Catechism and acceptance of its teaching that the body and blood of Christ are received by all communicants under the bread and wine. Since many congregations have chosen not to follow the findings of the Joint Commission on Theology and Practice of Confirmation, citing them is irrelevant to some. At the end, our Lord's invitation is again modified to include the decision of the pastor, the child, the family (sponsors), and the congregation as to whether the child qualifies. That "participation need not be tied to intellectual attainment" has always been recognized by good pastors, even when suitable standards such as knowledge of the Small Catechism, the main events of Biblical history, some selected hymn-stanzas, and a treasury of memorized Bible verses were expected of children who were able to learn them.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SACRAMENT

The Statement urges Holy Communion be given weekly and some weekdays on the basis of this remark in Apology XXIV, 1: "In our churches mass [a liturgical form] is celebrated every Sunday and on other festivals when the Sacrament is offered to those who wish for it . . ." The quotation should not be broken here, but the rest given: ". . . *after* they have been examined and absolved" (emphasis ours). Weekly Communion of the laity was virtually unknown before the Reformation, and subsequently uncommon outside of Wittenberg.⁵ Whether the Sacrament was received weekly, monthly, or less frequently in the young Lutheran Church, the pastor was required to meet with his parishioners personally for instruction and private confession. If weekly Communion is to be reintroduced today in a manner consistent with our Confessions, then pastors must be willing to devote more attention to the quality as well as the quantity of communions. If non-Lutherans are to be admitted,

they too must be fully instructed and “explored” in the Catechism, and heard in private confession, if we are serious about repristination of Wittenberg. The remark, “Corporate confession . . . is not required as a part of every service of Holy Communion,” appears to contradict Augsburg Confession XXV, 1, but could be justified in a parish situation where a thorough pastoral ministry is practiced. In the context of unionistic communion, however the assertion is questionable. Like many other contemporary pronouncements, moreover, the Statement fails to note the difference between reciting the Words of Institution (proclamation) and containing them within a Eucharistic Prayer (adoration).

Several suggestions regarding the sacramental elements likewise require our attention:

Only enough bread and wine should be brought to the altar to serve the congregation. Should the supply need to be replenished, it is not necessary to repeat the Words of Institution.

In case any bread or wine remain after all have communed, it may either be consumed or be kept for future use. The handling of the bread and wine which remain should reflect the sacred use for which they had been set apart.

These suggestions represent not merely a departure from the custom of many of our congregations, but also an apparent ignorance of Lutheran church history as well as of recent theological studies.⁶ An ample supply of bread and wine should be provided to avoid a shortage during the distribution. Should the supply run out, Lutheran churches which emphasize the presence of the true body and blood of Christ under the bread and wine usually require the consecration of fresh supplies. For both practical and theological reasons, bread and wine which have in the sacrament been the body and blood of Christ should be consumed after the service. Luther once demanded and brought about the dismissal of a pastor for treating consecrated wafers like ordinary bread, denouncing the careless man as a Zwinglian. We would do well to seek high standards of reverence today as well.

The following lines of the Statement are similarly a departure from Lutheran tradition:

While the precise manner in which the elements are presented is not the central issue, the common loaf and the common cup are preferable because they evoke the image of the unity of the many who participate in the broken loaf and the shared cup (1 Cor. 10:16-17). . .

The breaking of a common loaf should be discouraged for the

following reasons: (1) Despite the inadequate liturgical rubrics in our servicebooks, it is not mere bread and wine, but the true body and blood of the Lord, which is being handed out and received.⁷ Breaking of the bread easily leads to crumbs being dropped and walked over, which is sacrilegious. (2) In upholding their view that only a "spiritual presence of Christ" is afforded in the sacrament, other denominations have placed their emphasis upon the elements and insisted that the observance is not valid unless the "bread" is broken, which, they have claimed, proves that the body of Christ is not present. Accordingly breaking the bread is out of place in our churches. (3) Broken bread does not suggest unity but division. Not the external element, but the verily present Christ, established unity. (4) In a time when ecumenism, valid in itself, has often obscured true doctrinal differences, we should avoid superficial similarities to practices of the sacramentarians lest they confuse the simple.

There are, then, a number of praiseworthy suggestions in the Statement, such as some recommendations of good liturgical practices like the use of the common cup. Unfortunately, the Statement as a whole must be rejected because it fails to meet its objective of being fully consistent with the Holy Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the better ecumenical insights.

FOOTNOTES

1. Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (St. Louis, 1966). Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Minneapolis, 1959).
2. *Marburg Revisited*, ed. Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord (Minneapolis, 1966). Eugene M. Skibbe, *Protestant Agreement on the Lord's Supper* (Minneapolis, 1968). Other sources and literature are given in both.
3. See articles in RGG, I, pp. 1518 ff. Paul Althaus, *Die Prinzipien der deutschen reformierten Dogmatik im Zeitalter der aristotelischen Scholastik* (Leipzig, 1914 [reprint Darmstadt, 1967]). Hans Emil Weber, *Reformation, Orthodoxie und Rationalismus*, 3 vols. (Gütersloh, 1937 ff.).
4. The fundamental irreconcilability of this Covenant-theology with Lutheran thought is clearly shown in the materials cited in n. 3; see especially Weber, I/2, pp. 49-55, 74-75.
5. See Lowell C. Green, "How Frequently Was Communion Available in the 16th Century?" *Concordia Review*, I, No. 2 (July 1975), pp. 2-3.
6. Luther regarded anyone who treated the consecrated elements like mere bread and wine by returning them to the storage receptacles as Zwinglians, and called for the removal of a pastor for such loose practices. See his letter of July 4, 1543, to Simon Wolferinus in Eisleben. WA, Br. 10, pp. 336-342; cf. pp. 347-349. See the discussion of this in Edward Frederick Peters, *The Origin and Meaning of the Axiom: "Nothing has the character of a Sacrament outside of the use," In Sixteenth-Century and Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Theology*. Doctoral diss. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1968); especially pp. 188-196. To many theologians and churchmen of today, Luther's deep reverence for the Sacrament may seem

almost ludicrous; but this simply shows how little contemporary "Lutherans" really understand the Sacramentology of the Bible, of Luther, and of the Confessions, and how deep the inroads of Reformed theology and practice have really become.

7. The Confessions consistently refer to the elements distributed in the Lord's Supper not as bread and wine but as body and blood. See AC VII; SA III, vi (BS 450f. = BC 311); SD VII, 9, 16, 81.