

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 3

I. DOCTRINAL ISSUES

Infant communion: a reappraisal

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PREFACE

The general opinion of LCA pastors has been that it would be unwise to change the teaching and practice of the Church on the communion of infants; that is, the communion of babies as soon as practicable after they have been baptised. Instead, following discussion at the 2009 General Pastors' Conference and subsequent District Pastors' Conferences, the CTICR concurs with the general opinion of the pastorate that the Church continue to encourage communing children earlier than has been customary in the LCA, rather than moving precipitously to infant communion. While the CTICR does not recommend a specific age, the decision to admit children to the Lord's Table is to be made in the context of the guidelines given in the conclusion to this paper. They include the confidence of the parents and the pastor that the children are ready. This means that the CTICR does not recommend any change in the church's position at this stage. The document that follows has six main sections, by and large the material presented to the 2009 General Pastor's Conference, with an introduction that leads to the current LCA document on infant communion, and a conclusion with recommendations. There are two appendices, the first consisting of the pastoral guidelines for responsible communion practice from the 1990 General Pastors' Conference, and the second consisting of the commentary on the rite of admission to the sacrament of the altar, from *Church rites* (1994).

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1. INTRODUCTION

At its 1981 General Convention the LCA recognised the practice of the separation of first communion and confirmation as an acceptable form of confirmation ministry.¹ As a result many congregations now admit younger children to the sacrament of the altar. In 1986 the CTICR prepared a statement on Infant Communion which was adopted by the General Church Council. That statement was of the opinion that the practice of infant communion was unacceptable for the LCA.

A South Australia-Northern Territory Pastors' Conference in 2003 asked the CTICR to reopen the topic of infant communion, with a view to a widespread discussion throughout the LCA and a review of the Church's practice. The CTICR commissioned people to write papers for discussion at meetings: a paper supporting the CTICR's original 1986 document on infant communion (3, above), a paper critiquing the 1986 document (4), and papers that reflected on infant communion in the light of biblical, historical and pastoral perspectives (5–7). For the most part the papers argued in favour of the practice of infant communion, whereas conversation around the table reflected a more diverse range of opinions. These papers provided the basis for a comprehensive discussion at the 2009 General Pastors' Conference.² District Pastors' Conferences in 2010 discussed the issue once more and offered further feedback to the CTICR.

2. THE CURRENT 'INFANT COMMUNION' DOCUMENT (DSTO E10–12)

This document was prepared by the CTICR, and adopted by the General Church Council in February 1986. It is included here to provide context for the discussion that follows. It begins:

The admission of infants to the Sacrament of the Altar is unacceptable, and should not be introduced into the practice of the Lutheran Church of Australia for the following reasons:

1. CONFESSIONAL

The Lutheran Confessions state quite clearly to whom the Sacrament of the Altar is to be administered. In this connection, the following emphases are made:

- a. The Sacrament is administered only to those who have been 'instructed, examined and absolved' (Apol.XV:40, Tappert, 220); who 'know what they seek and why they come' (LC V:2, Tappert, p447). These statements apply not only to adults but also to children since they are made in the contexts of the worship of children and the instruction of children. See Apol.XV:40, 41 (Tappert,220); LC, Shorter Preface, 1–3 (Tappert, 362); LC V:87 (Tappert, 456).
- b. The Sacrament requires that those who commune are 'worthy and well prepared'. In answer to the question: 'Who, then receives the Sacrament worthily?', the Confessions answer: 'He is truly worthy and well prepared who believes these words: "for you" and "for the forgiveness of sins". On the other hand, he who does not believe these words, or doubts them, is unworthy and unprepared, for the words "for you" require truly believing hearts' (SC VI:9,10 Tappert, 352). See also LC V:33ff (Tappert, 450); FC SD VII:68ff (Tappert, 582).
- c. The Sacrament does not confer grace *ex opera operato*, but requires faith which believes the promise and accepts what is promised and offered in the Sacrament. See Apology XIII:18ff (Tappert, 213f); Apology XXIV:69ff (Tappert, 262).

¹ LCA Convention Report, 1981.

² The papers on biblical, historical and pastoral perspectives presented at the General Pastors' Conference were in their original form, not summaries.

2. THEOLOGICAL

- a. It is argued by some of the advocates for infant communion that since infants are baptised they should also be communed. This argument, it may be noted, was used also by the Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation as a 'logical' argument against the practice of infant baptism. In support the argument, advocates of infant communion rest their claim on the fact that in both sacraments the emphasis must be placed not on the condition of the receiver but on God as the gracious Giver.

It is true that in both sacraments God is the gracious Giver, but the conclusion reached from this, viz, that infants may be communed as well as baptised, disregards the unique nature and character of the two sacraments through which God works.

For example:

The essence of Baptism is the application of water to the candidate by the command of Christ in the name of the Trinity (SC, IVG, 1-4). Moreover, Baptism is administered only once in a person's life, for 'baptism remains forever' (LC, IV, 77); 'a Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and ever continued' (LC, I*V, 60); 'Even though we fall from it and sin, nevertheless we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old man' (LC, (V, 77).

The Lord's Supper, too, rests on Christ's words of institution, but essentially it has to do with 'bodily eating and drinking' (SC, VI, 7, 8), awareness of what one is eating and drinking, and above all, 'worthy' eating and drinking — 'the chief thing in the sacrament' (SC, VI, 8), viz. believing the words 'for you' and 'for the forgiveness of sins' (SC, VI, 9, 10). Therefore, communicants are to receive the Lord's Supper frequently and to be properly prepared for such communing (SC, VI, 10; LC, V, 36ff.)

- b. Some advocates for infant communion maintain that since infants are made members of the church and of the Christian congregation by virtue of their baptism, they are entitled to practise all the rights and privileges of such membership, including the receiving of the Sacrament of the Altar. Thus argument, too, is based on the assumption that Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar are identical sacraments, that the latter is as appropriate and fitting for infants as the former. What is said in the Scriptures about 'fitting communion', 1 Cor 11:27ff, is overlooked, ignored, or given an interpretation that does not apply to infants (see *f* below).
- c. There is a persistent implicit, if not explicit, claim in the arguments of the advocates for the admission of infants to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is essential for salvation (the claim for certain church fathers, e.g. Cyprian, Augustine) or that it bestows a gift that neither Baptism nor the Word bestows. Lutheran teaching is that all three means of grace bestow the same grace of God, but in different ways. It is one thing — and unacceptable — to argue that, because there are three means of grace, therefore we can ignore one or the other of them. It is quite another thing to accept and use all three means of grace, but to distinguish from the nature of the means of grace itself when it can rightly be used, that is, used in accordance with God's purpose and will. Thus, while Baptism is the sacrament of admission to the church and gives the recipient all the rights and privileges of membership in the church, including the right of admission to the Sacrament of the Altar, it does not follow from the nature of either sacrament that this right, in the case of infants, must be exercised immediately.
- d. Advocates for infant communion claim that the Western Church in the early centuries practised infant communion, but discontinued this practice when certain new 'doctrines' were introduced into the church, e.g. Transubstantiation, communing in one kind, a growing insistence on a certain kind of knowledge and understanding that comes with the 'age of discretion'. It does not follow from this kind of argument, however, that the church of today should return to the earlier practice because:
- it is not always clear to what extent the early church did practise infant communion. Hippolytus, for example, speaks of baptising infants but not of communing infants
 - the practice was often based on a wrong interpretation of the Scriptures, especially of John 6:53.
- e. In his institution of the Sacrament of the Altar, our Lord used the elements of bread and wine. Neither element is suitable food and drink for infants. Neither element was then, nor is it now, used as food and drink for infants. The church in communing infants, however, has devised its own ways of doing so, e.g. dipping a morsel of bread in wine (Orthodox practice) or simply giving only a drop of wine (Western practice until the cup was withheld from the laity). What our Lord intended to be used in the Sacrament is clearly stated, and it is hardly likely that he wished to tax the ingenuity of the church to find ways in which a sacrament, intended for those who could eat and drink, could be given also to infants.

- f. Advocates for the admission of infants to the Sacrament claim that 1 Corinthians 11 has been wrongly interpreted to exclude infants from the Sacrament. For example:
- St Paul's concern here is not about recognising the Eucharistic bread and wine in the Sacrament, or about accepting the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament or the nature of the fellowship involved in the Sacrament, or about examining oneself. It is rather about the Corinthians' failure to observe fraternal charity, their contempt for the poor and the weak.
 - Even if the passage does deal with the nature of the Sacrament and participation in it, what applies essentially to an adult situation should not be applied to infants.

Interpretations of this kind are inconsistent with interpretations given in the Confessions (AC, XXIV, 12; FC, SD, VII, 60) and by Lutheran exegetes, past and present, even though Luther in his *Tabletalk* (No 373) claims that, when St Paul said that a man should examine himself, 'he spoke only of adults because he was speaking about those who were quarrelling among themselves. However, he doesn't forbid the sacrament of the altar be given to children' (NB: 'children', not 'infants'). Earlier in the same extract, Luther says, 'There is no urgency about the sacrament of the altar for children'. And while in Reformation practice it appears that children, after due instruction, were communed, there is no evidence that infants were communed.

- g. The statements above apply to **infant** communion. On the question of when **children** may be admitted to the Sacrament of the Altar, see the material provided by the Board for Congregational Life: 'Communion before Confirmation'.

3. ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF THE CTICR DOCUMENT 'INFANT COMMUNION' (DSTO E10–12)

The document 'Infant Communion', adopted by the GCC in 1986 and the LCA general convention in 1987, concluded that 'the admission of infants to the Sacrament of the Altar is unacceptable'. Drawing on evidence from the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions the statement teaches that the sacrament of the altar is to be administered only to those who have been 'instructed, examined and absolved' and 'who know what they seek and why they come' (Ap XV 40 and LC V 2). The 1986 document encouraged the present practice of giving instruction before confirmation to younger children capable of self-examination in keeping with 1 Corinthians 11:28, 'Let a person examine himself'. These biblical and confessional understandings are the basis for the statement's conclusions with respect to infant communion.

The statement expresses concern that some arguments for infant communion seem to assume that the sacraments are essentially the same. However, the statement says, the two sacraments have their own unique character. Baptism is a sacrament of regeneration (Tit 3:5–8) and admission to the church; the Lord's Supper is for the forgiveness of sins and for strengthening the faith of those who are consciously wearied by the burden of sin. The statement proposes that to give this sacrament to baptised infants without conscious repentance and faith could turn the sacrament into an *opus operatum*.

In considering this issue, the statement reflects on the concept of the scriptural foundations for teaching (*sedes doctrinae*), and it says that it is not the Lutheran procedure to use John 6 as the *sedes doctrinae* for the Lord's Supper. As Luther insisted in debating Zwingli, the foundational texts on the Lord's Supper must be the Synoptic and Pauline passages on the institution. It was Zwingli who used John 6. Lutherans acknowledge the Eucharistic allusions in John 6, but it is not the source from which we determine the nature of the sacrament and how it should be celebrated. Moreover, it continues, those who appeal to John 6:53 follow the wrong interpretation given by Augustine and Cyprian that, because there is no salvation without sacramental eating and drinking, the sacrament must be given to infants. It should be pointed out that this interpretation of John 6:53 is rejected in Solid Declaration VII 61, which says that such eating is spiritual; only faith is absolutely essential. Similarly, with baptism, we do not start with John 3 but with Matthew 28:19.

The crux is 1 Corinthians 11:27–32, especially: ‘Let a person examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup’ (vs 28), and, ‘Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself’ (vs 29). Advocates of infant communion claim that these verses have been improperly used to exclude infants. However, even though it may be granted that Paul is thinking primarily of abuses by adults, it still does not mean that his warnings lack general application.

Jesus and his parents recognised an ‘age of discretion’, and that is why Jesus visited the temple for Passover for the first time when he was 12. The Reformers offered the sacrament both to adults and properly instructed school children. They were chiefly concerned to emphasise the importance of faith for the beneficial reception of the supper and to help Christians, including school children, receive the sacrament.

4. RESPONSE TO THE CTICR DOCUMENT ‘INFANT COMMUNION’ (DSTO E10–12)

The official LCA statement on infant communion argues that ‘the admission of infants to the Sacrament of the Altar is unacceptable’ (above, page 2). It leaves open the question of when children may be admitted to the Sacrament of the Altar and refers readers to material provided by the Board for Congregational Life: ‘Communion before Confirmation’ (2g; above). The BCL material paved the way for the communion of children from about grade five, roughly age 10.

The 1986 document (1a; above) quotes passages from the Lutheran Confessions that say the Sacrament is administered only to those who have been ‘instructed, examined and absolved’ (Apol XV 40) and who ‘know what they seek and why they come’ (LC V 2). *Infant Communion* asserts clearly that the Reformers offered the sacrament both to adults and to properly instructed school children. But we need to keep in mind the context. The Reformers were chiefly concerned to emphasise the importance of faith for the beneficial reception of the supper and to help Christians, including school-children, receive the sacrament. If we were to commune infants, this would need to be followed up as soon as possible with appropriate instruction. We would also need to keep in mind Eugene Brand’s concern that the sacrament not be offered to infants indiscriminately. It should be reserved for infants from faithful families (see the section on Pastoral Considerations).

As *Infant Communion* rightly states, worthy reception of the sacrament requires faith. ‘The Sacrament does not confer grace *ex opere operato*, but requires faith which believes the promise and accepts what is promised and offered in the Sacrament’ (1c; above). However, Jesus says, ‘little ones ... believe in me’ (Matt 18:6). Indeed, Jesus holds up little ones as a model whose simple, unreflecting faith often puts adults to shame (Matt 18:1–6).

The document argues that advocates of infant communion place sole emphasis on ‘God as the gracious giver’ rather than ‘the condition of the receiver’ (2.a; above). In response it must be said that advocates of earlier communion place great emphasis on the faith of infants and small children.

It is also not true that advocates of infant communion disregard ‘the unique nature and character of the two sacraments’ (2a; above). They appreciate that the Lord’s Supper bestows distinct blessings. It is also not the case that they overlook and ignore 1 Corinthians 11:27–29 on ‘fitting communion’ (2b; above). With Luther, they believe that Paul’s concern is with the irreverence of the Corinthian adults, making them unfit to commune, and that 1 Corinthians 11:27–29 does not necessarily debar infants from the sacrament.

The document correctly points to the 'implicit, if not explicit, claim' in the arguments of infant communion advocates that the Lord's Supper 'is essential for salvation' (2c; above). If we argue from John 3:5 that baptism is a prerequisite for entering God's kingdom, then by the same logic we may conclude from John 6:53 that eating the flesh of the Son of Man and drinking his blood is a prerequisite for receiving eternal life. However, as Augustine said in relation to baptism, the Lord's Supper is not absolutely necessary for salvation. It is not the lack of the sacrament (*defectus*) but contempt (*contemptus*) for the sacrament that jeopardises our salvation. At all events, the remarkable benefits that Jesus says are conferred by the sacrament (John 6:53–55) would suggest that it should be offered as early as possible.

The document states that advocates of infant communion claim that communion 'bestows a gift that neither Baptism nor the Word bestows' (2c; above). But Lutheran advocates of infant and early childhood communion³ agree with Smalcald Articles III,4 that 'the gospel ... gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is extravagantly rich in his grace: first, through the spoken word; second, through baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar'. While it may be debated whether Holy Communion bestows some benefit over and above the gospel conveyed to us in baptism and the Word, this question is not central to the present debate.

Advocates of infant and early childhood communion do not merely 'claim that the Western Church in the early centuries practised infant communion, but discontinued this practice when certain new "doctrines" were introduced into the church, e.g., transubstantiation, communing in one kind...' (2d; above). There is solid evidence to support their 'claim' (see section 6, Historical perspectives, below).

It is true that 'it does not follow (from the early church's practice of infant communion) that the church of today should return to the earlier practice' (2d; above). However, when we believe a certain pastoral practice is well grounded in scripture, we find it reassuring when it also has the support of a long tradition both in eastern and western Christianity (cf. infant baptism, the doctrine of the real presence).

To say that any communing of infants in the early church 'was often based on a wrong interpretation of the Scriptures, especially of John 6:53' (2d; above), seems to assume that John 6:53 must be interpreted spiritually, not sacramentally. This assumption is open to question.⁴ The document also states that 'neither element [neither bread nor wine] is suitable for infants' (2e; above). However, the document also admits that the Orthodox church finds no serious obstacle here, 'dipping a morsel of bread in wine', and Western practice was to give infants 'only a drop of wine'.

The document wrestles with a straw man when it states that advocates of infant communion believe Paul's concern in 1 Corinthians 11 'is not about recognising the Eucharistic bread and wine in the Sacrament, or about accepting the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament or the nature of the fellowship involved in the Sacrament, or about examining oneself. It is rather about the Corinthians' failure to observe fraternal charity, their contempt for the poor and the weak' (2f; above, page 3). Those who support infant communion, in common with Lutherans world-wide, believe that in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul is

³ See e.g. Mark Dalby, *Infant communion: the New Testament to the Reformation*, Grove Books, Cambridge, 2003, 28.

⁴ Confronted by Zwingli's holding up John 6:63 as his trump card ('The flesh is of no avail...') Luther accepted a spiritual interpretation of John 6: 'We must realize...that this chapter does not refer to the Sacrament but to spiritual nourishment and eating' (*Luther's Works* 23:118). Luther insisted on the Real Presence on the basis of the words of institution in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul. Many Lutherans have followed Luther in his denial that John 6:51–58 may be understood sacramentally. For a contrary view see Hermann Sasse, *This is my body* (Augsburg, 1959), 177–86, especially note 117 on page 178; and Werner Elert, 'John's contribution to the understanding of holy communion' in *The Lord's Supper Today* (CPH, 1973), 27–32.

concerned about both matters: reverence for the sacrament and relations among the Corinthians

Conclusion

This response to the 1986 document intends to highlight the issues for discussion in determining whether infant communion is permissible. The chief concern is to bring committed Lutheran families together at the Lord's Table and to promote a more consistent practice across the LCA.

5. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

a. 1 Corinthians 11:27–29

Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29 have provided the main basis for the Lutheran church's opposition to infant communion. However, while adhering firmly to those things that belong to fitting participation—careful instruction in the true nature of the sacrament, self-examination and confession—it is also important to cast the net wider and reflect on what was going on in the Corinthian church, shown clearly in the preceding and following verses (1 Cor 10:1–12; 11:17–26, and 30–34).

The opening verses of chapter 10 reveal that Old Testament Israel assumed their 'sacraments' provided immunity from God's wrath and judgment, giving them the licence to engage in idolatry and immorality. In the same way, some members of the Corinthian church concluded from the nature of holy communion as the 'medicine of immortality' that they were no longer accountable for their conduct (10:11,12).

As a result, the 'love feasts' that preceded the sacrament were marred by self-centred behaviour of the rich and influential members (the 'haves'), who went ahead with their own meals and even became drunk, thus humiliating the working classes and the poor (the 'have nots'), keeping them at bay till the Lord's Supper proper commenced (11:21,22,33,34). This loveless behaviour was an affront to Christ's body in a twofold sense: both the body of believers, and Christ's true bodily presence in the sacramental elements.

This means that those who Paul said were unworthy to partake in the Lord's Supper were those whose irreverent and loveless behaviour was fracturing the unity of Christ's body, the church, not infants. Therefore, as Luther said,⁵ it is inappropriate to use Paul's words to exclude infants from the Lord's Supper.

b. John 6:53–57

In connection with baptism Jesus says, 'Amen, amen, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit' (John 3:5). And in connection with the Lord's Supper he says, 'Amen, amen, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you' (John 6:53). The similar wording makes it clear that the second birth of baptism and the ongoing sustenance of Holy Communion are equally vital for the life and nourishment of Christ's followers.⁶ This does not mean that the Lord's Supper is essential for salvation. As shown above (page 5), Augustine has made it clear that it is not the lack of the Eucharist that jeopardises salvation, but its despising.

Certainly the sacramental gifts are different from each other. The central image of baptism is birth, whereas dining at table is the central image for the Eucharist. Baptism

⁵ See footnote 16.

⁶ Hermann Sasse and Werner Elert have helped the church understand John 6 sacramentally (see footnote 4).

grants entry into the kingdom of heaven (3:3–5), whereas the Eucharist involves the mutual indwelling of Christ and those who dine with him at his table, receiving eternal life, and being raised on the last day (6:39,40,47,51,54,56,58,68). None of these differences, however, are of a nature that would debar infants from receiving the Lord's Supper.

The gifts of baptism and communion interact with one another in a highly therapeutic manner, a point re-enforced by the parallel wording of John 3:5 and 6:53. The healing and strengthening properties of the Lord's Supper, working in harmony with the daily return to baptism in repentant faith, could have nothing but the most beneficial effect in the hearts and lives of the faithful from cradle to dying breath.

c. Other New Testament material

At the institution of the Lord's Supper Jesus said all should partake (Matt 26:27; Mk 14:23–26). There is no suggestion that infants were to be excluded. On the contrary, Jesus became angry with his disciples for trying to prevent parents from bringing their children to him for a blessing (Matt 19:13–15; Mk 10:13–16). Jesus said that true greatness in the kingdom of heaven was to be found among children and those who 'change and become like children' (Matt 18:3,4). And the feeding miracles in the gospels (Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–9; John 6:1–14), rich in allusions to the Lord's Supper, make it clear that all were fed (see e.g. Mark 6:41; 8:6).

6. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

It is established that infants were communed in the early church and that this practice continues in the eastern churches, while in the western church the practice was halted by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and forbidden by the Council of Trent (1562).⁷ Until the late 20th century Lutherans followed the Roman Church in excluding infants, but now a few Lutheran churches are reviewing their practice, and a few are now communing infants.

a. Infant communion in the early and mediaeval church

There has been discussion on whether infant communion goes back to the very beginning: 'If infant baptism goes back to New Testament times, so too may infant communion'.⁸ We are dependent on anecdotal information. Writing in AD 251, Cyprian witnesses that little ones who were carried in the arms of their parents were receiving the sacrament.⁹ The 4th century *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* tell us that in the distribution little children are to be communed after the clergy and religious women: '... then the children; and then all the people in order'.¹⁰ St Augustine (AD 354–430) mentions in several places that infants commune. In a sermon he says that '...they are infants, but they become participants at his table, so that they may have life in themselves'.¹¹ In a letter Augustine argues from John 6:53 that it is necessary for infants to commune so that they may have salvation and eternal life.¹²

⁷ In the Orthodox church the infant receives baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist together as rites of initiation. This equates to admission to the Sacrament. If the child is brought to the altar later the child may receive Holy Communion. However, depending on the parents' worship habits this may not happen again for years, or at least infrequently.

⁸ Dalby, 7 (see footnote 3 for reference).

⁹ Cyprian, *De Lapsis*, 9,25.

¹⁰ *Ap Const*, 8,13.

¹¹ Augustine, *Sermon* 174.6.

¹² Augustine, *Letter* 217.5.16. As already indicated (above, page 6) Augustine was clear that it wasn't the lack of the sacrament that put one's salvation at risk, but its despising.

The practice of infant communion continued in the mediaeval western church: for example: Ordo Romanus XI, the 11th Council of Toledo (AD 675), the Gregorian Sacramentary, the Carolingian canon (c 810–13), Alcuin, Elfric of York, Lanfranc of Canterbury (c 1070), Anselm, and others.¹³

Change occurred from the late 11th century onwards. Frank Senn summarises:

[T]he separation of first communion from baptism was a consequence of [a] growing ... scrupulosity about handling the consecrated elements. At first the bread was removed from infant[s] ... out of concern that they ... might spit it up... Two decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council were fateful to the practice of infant communion: the decision to remove the cup from all lay communicants, [and] the rule that all Christians should go to confession before receiving communion.¹⁴

From then onwards infant communion disappeared from the western church, although it lingered in some places. In 1562 the Council of Trent opposed it on the grounds that little children 'lack the use of reason'.¹⁵

b. Lutheran teaching and practice in regard to infant communion

Luther believed the crucial text in 1 Corinthians 11:28 was about quarrelling adults and does not forbid the sacrament to children.¹⁶ However, Luther himself and the Lutheran churches followed the western church in rejecting infant communion. The main reason given in the Confessions is this: 'The custom has been retained among us of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved.'¹⁷ Chemnitz summed up the position of the 16th century Reformers and the theologians of the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy who followed:

With regard to the Lord's Supper Paul says: 'Let a man examine himself' (1 Cor 11:28). Likewise: 'Let him discern the Lord's body' [1 Cor 11:29], a thing which cannot be ascribed to infants. ... There remains therefore [for infants]... only the sacrament of baptism.¹⁸

The Lutheran Church in Australia came out of this tradition and did not seriously consider the topic of infant communion until recent times. North American Lutherans began to discuss infant communion in the late 1970s. It was approved by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (1991) and then by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1997).

7. PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES

a. The value of participation as a basis for catechesis

The LCA struggles to engage many teenage children in catechetical instruction in the Christian faith. Indeed, the LCA faces a downturn in catechetical instruction for all ages. It may plausibly be argued that infants who communed from the outset would be more likely to grow into (a) the conscious faith and repentance that are required of all communicants; (b) the sense of belonging as integral members of the church; and (c) full participation in the sacramental life of the church with the desire for lifelong education. In light of the growing appreciation of affective learning for education, it may also be wise pedagogically for catechetical instruction to be based on the experience of catechumens.

¹³ See Dalby, 17–20.

¹⁴ Frank C Senn, 'Issues in "infant communion"', *Dialog* 22 (Summer 1983), 222.

¹⁵ Text in *Lutheran Forum* (Christmas 1996), 12.

¹⁶ Luther, *Table Talk* no. 365, LW 54:58.

¹⁷ AC 25.1.

¹⁸ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans Fred Kramer (Concordia Publishing House, St Louis, 1978), 2:165,66.

The longer first communion is delayed, the longer we deny children the benefits and consolation of the sacrament during the storms and stresses of childhood. Given our church's appreciation that Christ's body and blood are given for the benefit of body and soul, the responsible course of action would be to ensure that even infants communed as soon as possible and thus received the means for establishing them in faith and discipleship. If we communed infants, this should be followed up as soon as possible with appropriate instruction.

b. Infants and faith

As *Infant Communion* states, worthy reception of the sacrament requires faith. 'The Sacrament does not confer grace *ex opere operato*, but requires faith which believes the promise and accepts what is promised and offered in the Sacrament' (1c; above). Jesus says 'little ones ... believe in me' (Matt 18:6). He holds them up as a model of faith. Advocates of earlier communion place great emphasis on the faith of infants and small children.

A caveat

The Lord's Supper should not 'be demeaned and cheapened by careless invitations'¹⁹ This includes careless invitations to children. Eugene Brand cautions:

It is one thing to commune an infant/young child who regularly comes with its parent to the altar and who, thus, more and more consciously will 'understand' the connections between the gospel, the bread and wine, the biological family relationship and the relationship within the ecclesial family under the Spirit. Teaching about the Eucharist would, from the beginning, have an experiential referent [rather than teaching towards that distant day when they first receive the sacrament]. It is quite another thing to baptise and give communion indiscriminately to infants unattached to the local congregation.²⁰

Regardless of what we do with respect to infant communion, any move to earlier communion will be a blessing for children only to the extent that it occurs in the context of a faithful family and is accompanied by teaching appropriate to their age. This means that the discussion about the communion of infants always needs to be seen on the basis that it refers only to the children of regularly worshipping members of the Lutheran church.

8. CONCLUSION WITH RECOMMENDATIONS

This study and discussion began with a focus on infant communion. What has emerged is a consensus that the Church do all it can to ensure that children are admitted to communion at the earliest appropriate age. It is also vital that the Church uphold the connection between communion and life-long catechesis and ensure that children currently being admitted to communion are being appropriately catechised.

With respect to the communing of infants, the CTICR is not recommending a change to the Church's position as stated in the 1986 DSTO document 'Infant Communion'. However, the CTICR has passed on the following advice to the College of Presidents with respect to the earlier communing of children.

After research, discussion and dialogue with pastors of the Church, the CTICR is advising the College of Presidents that the Church offer to families the preparation and admission

¹⁹ Michael Rothaar, 'What's your idea of the most desirable age for a child's first communion', ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries, April 1995.

²⁰ *Worship*, 50/1 (January 1976), 41.

of children to communion at the earliest possible age, as part of the Church's responsibility to children, to strengthen their life in Christ and in his body, the church.

With respect to the earliest appropriate age, the Church is to take into account:

- the rite of 'Admission to the Sacrament of the Altar', in *Church Rites* (20–23) and the commentary on the rite (appendix 2, below, in *Church Rites*, 319,20)
- the pastoral and family context
- guidance given in the document 'Responsible Communion Practice' (Appendix 1, below)
- the exercise of the public office of the keys

From feedback received it appears that the papers prepared and the ensuing discussion have been helpful for the pastors of the Church as they seek to guide the Church in the preparation of children for communion and the admission of children to the altar at the earliest appropriate age.

9. APPENDIX 1: SOME PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSIBLE COMMUNION PRACTICE

DSTO, Volume 2E – adopted by General Pastors Conference in 1990

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;
 - 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 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.

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

10. APPENDIX 2: ADMISSION TO THE SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR— COMMENTARY

The LCA order of service titled ‘Admission to the sacrament of the altar’ (*Church rites: Lutheran Church of Australia*, 19–23) has the following commentary (ibid, 319,20). The numbers and the words in bold letters refer to the section headings throughout the rite.

Introduction

In the past, young people in the Lutheran church have usually been admitted to the sacrament of the altar in the rite of confirmation, in early adolescence. However, many congregations are now admitting younger children to the sacrament, before confirmation. This rite is for such admissions. A child who takes part in this rite will normally take part in the rite of confirmation some time later.

The rite

A **presentation** (1) of the candidates may take place at the font, where every pilgrimage to the altar has its beginning. The parents and sponsors have played a special role in the journey of the candidates to this significant point.

The foundational **word of God** (2) focuses on the Lord's Supper, and the need for worthy participation and self-examination.

The **renunciation and confession** (3) indicates that the candidates' admission to the Lord's Supper is based on their baptism and their faith in the Triune God. Because they have been loosed from Satan's bonds and bound in faith to the Triune God, they may receive the benefits of the church, including communion with Christ and all the faithful at his table. They also declare, in the hearing of the community with whom they will eat and drink in fellowship, that they believe that the consecrated bread and wine of the Lord's Supper does in actual fact convey the body and blood of Christ to the communicant for forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

The minister can then exercise the office of the keys and give the candidates **admission to the sacrament** (4), with its immense blessings.

After **prayer** (5) for the candidates and **blessing** (6) on them, the congregation is invited to **receive** (7) and support their fellow members who have just been admitted to the sacrament. God's blessing of **peace** (8) is given to them. The service continues, culminating in participation together at the Lord's table.