

## DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

### VOLUME 1

#### G. INTER-DENOMINATIONAL COOPERATION – CHURCH MOVEMENTS

## The Lutheran Church of Australia and Lutheran charismatic renewal

*Prepared by the Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations. Adopted by the General Church Council, February 1977.*

---

### A. LUTHERANS AND SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

Lutherans confess that God's good gifts are perfect (James 1:17), but know that the life of the Christian still includes human imperfection, the reality of sin. Scripture therefore continually calls for growth in God's perfect gifts, for self-examination, repentance, and renewal (Rev 3 and 4). The Christian life involves a continual struggle to hold on to the Spirit's gifts once given to us; it is a pressing on to the perfection that lies ahead of us in Christ (Phil 3:14). God's Word calls for the renewal of the individual (Col 3:10; Rom 12:2) as well as for the constant renewal of the whole Church. But the basic and fundamental renewal which is God's original work in us through His Holy Spirit has taken place in our Baptism (Titus 3:5). And so any further renewal is a daily process – 'The inner nature is being renewed every day' (2 Cor 4:16). This is still the work of God through His Spirit. The classical statement on spiritual renewal in the Lutheran Confessions reminds us that 'our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity for ever' (Small Catechism on Baptism).

The Church thanks God and His Spirit for all signs of spiritual life. All believers have received the grace (*charis*) of God in Christ through the work of the Spirit; the gifts (*charismata*) of the Spirit are also to be seen throughout the Church. In this sense we can speak of all Christians as charismatics, for every believer has a gift. However, the term 'charismatic' has come to be used especially for those who believe they have, or still seek, a special filling of the Spirit and His gifts. Our purpose is not to question the sincerity or the conviction of those who believe that they have been filled with the Spirit in a special way. The Church praises God for all evidence of evangelical zeal, of a renewed desire to hear and study God's Word, and to use the gifts of the Spirit in the service of the Lord.

The formation of charismatic groups could be another reminder to the Church as a whole of besetting weaknesses which may be found from time to time in our congregations: a lack of community life and rich spiritual fellowship, a cold profession of faith without the warmth of a glowing love, a lack of participation in worship and in the front-line of the Church's mission, and a lack of sincere striving for personal sanctification and piety – in short, a quenching of the Spirit. All Lutherans will surely agree that the Church continually needs the renewing power of the Holy Spirit if it is to be the Church that the Lord wants it to be.

## B. VITAL CONCERNS AND PROBLEMS

With all positive features of Lutheran charismatic renewal there are a number of things that give cause for deep concern.

1. The charismatic movement throughout the world is deeply influenced by non-Lutheran theology. The LCA is a confessional Church which takes her confession of faith seriously. Any theology or practice which does not conform to her confession must be rejected. Charismatics who take their Lutheran profession seriously cannot run counter to Scripture and the confession of the Church. They should study the Confessions carefully, and subject all their reading and study of charismatic literature to critical scrutiny in the light of Scripture and the Confessions.
2. There is legitimate concern over the formation of sectional groups which run across the congregational life of the Church. Activities in such groups should not conflict with participation in the life of the local congregation. Lutheran charismatics should seek spiritual renewal first and foremost within their congregations.
3. The LCA is a Church with a rich sacramental theology. It confesses that the Spirit works through the external means of grace, the objective Word and the Sacraments. The Lutheran character of charismatic renewal is, however, denied when infant Baptism is rejected, when adults are 'rebaptised', and when Church practice on the Lord's Supper is ignored or deliberately flouted, so that there is open communion. Lutheran charismatic leaders should clearly reject such teaching and practice and do all in their power to see that these things do not happen.
4. Above all, the Church must be concerned that all theology of the Spirit and personal claims to the Spirit's gifts and the experience of His power conform to the truth of Scripture. The Spirit today does not work counter to the inspired Word which He gave in the past. Nor must the Gospel description of what happened in New Testament times be turned into a law prescription of what must be done and what must happen today. At this point the Church must warn against the intrusion of an un-Lutheran view of Scripture which predominates in much charismatic literature, for example, in the treatment of certain stories in the Acts of the Apostles as divine precedent which must be followed today.

## C. THE CENTRAL ISSUES

1. The central issue in charismatic renewal is not the validity and place of certain charismatic gifts, but the gift of the Spirit Himself. Lutherans confess that the Spirit is always gift, that this gift is first received in Baptism (John 3:5; Titus 3:5), and that any filling of the Spirit is always God's unmerited gift.

The view that Baptism does not give the Spirit, that the believer can be a son of God without the possession of His Spirit is to be rejected (From.8). False also is the view that there is a second Spirit-baptism which must complement an earlier water-baptism, or that this second experience of the Spirit can in any way be earned by the believer, by his piety, his holiness, or by a predisposition.

2. Being filled with the Holy Spirit, which should be the earnest desire of every Christian (Eph 5:18), is part of the growth in Christ which begins at Baptism. This life-long spiritual baptism is an 'awakening to the reality and power of the Holy Spirit and His gifts, which has its roots in baptism, and will have its final consummation at the Last Day' (Larry Christenson, *An Introduction to Lutheran Charismatic Renewal*, 4).

The view that the filling with the Holy Spirit is a momentary experience apart from Baptism, an isolated high-point in the Christian's life, is unscriptural, as is any claim that one is fully a Christian only after such a momentary experience.

3. The Spirit works through the means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments, as He binds believers into the Body of Christ as a community of faith, love and hope (the fruit of the Spirit). The Spirit is received as an objective gift in Baptism. His presence is consciously experienced first and foremost as the believer learns to trust God's promises in the Gospel, and as he continually eats and drinks the body and blood of the Lord in the Eucharist.

This excludes any 'experience' of the Spirit which by-passes the means of grace, which runs counter to the Word or claims an immediate special revelation, and also disqualifies any reliance on subjective experience as the foundation of Christian faith and life. The certainty of God's saving presence and power is not determined by man's feelings, but by the objective Word which creates and does what it promises.

4. The Spirit is still the giver of every gift to believers today. Christians are not to reject these gifts and so quench the Spirit (1 Thess 5:12–20). With St Paul they are to acknowledge that these gifts are given for service and not for self-glorification or self-gratification. God gives according to His gracious will, and not according to man's direction.

God is thus in no way bound to present the believer with any one gift of the Spirit. Furthermore, a claim to a special gift or to gifts which reveals personal pride or implies a superior spiritual maturity over other believers, denies the very nature and purpose of the Spirit's gifts.

5. St Paul's admonition to test every gift as to its validity, its relative importance and its function within the body of believers (1 Thess 5:21; 1 Cor 14:32,33,37–40) must always be heeded. Such testing must apply the clear Word of God and not be based on a subjective, emotional response. In addition, Paul clearly points to the primacy of those gifts which are part of the ministry of the Word, its clear preaching and teaching (1 Cor 12:28; Rom 2:7,8; Eph 4:11).

Thus there should be no uncritical acceptance of all claims to the possession of a charismatic gift, no pre-occupation with spectacular gifts (such as speaking in tongues and healing) which suggests that these are marks of spiritual maturity or prescriptive and normative for all Christians. This produced the state of affairs which Paul found in ancient Corinth where the false emphases on and abuse of some gifts gave rise to boasting, envy and strife.

6. The unity of the Spirit is a unity in Christ, through Baptism, a unity of faith and confession (Eph 4:4–6). This God-given unity in Christ includes all believers with their different talents and gifts, their different personalities, also different legitimate forms of piety.

Thus a similarity of spiritual experience, or the common possession of certain gifts is not the basis of Christian unity, of fellowship in Word and Sacrament. There is no higher spiritual fellowship as a basis for the sharing of the Lord's Supper than the unity of faith based on the confession of the truth of God's Word.

7. Justification and the gift of the Spirit in Baptism is the starting point of the struggle for holiness and personal sanctification. The Lord who is our righteousness is also our holiness. He has set us free from slavery to sin and given us the glorious liberty of the sons of God. The believer is saint and sinner at the same time, is always addressed by the Law and the Gospel, for in this life the reality of sin remains as a continual threat to the believer's life in Christ.

Holiness is not a precondition for the filling of the Holy Spirit, but a result of that filling, as the Spirit fights against the flesh (Gal 5:16–25). Our freedom in Christ does not free us from obedience to God's will, nor does it allow any perfectionism or spiritual pride which overlooks the awful reality of sin, or a new legalism which entitles us to determine God's will according to our own thinking. While affirming the victory (in Christ by faith) over sin and the powers of this world, Lutherans reject a theology of glory which ignores the need for daily contrition and repentance, and the struggle for holiness in which the Spirit wars against the sinful flesh (Rom 7; Gal 5).

8. The Spirit still gives special gifts today. However, it is by no means easy to understand clearly the function and operation of all the special gifts outlined, for example, in 1 Corinthians 12. We dare not interpret terms and phenomena in Scripture on the basis of modern experiences and events. This is true of prophecy, tongues and their interpretation, healing and other gifts.

We need to remember that God cannot be coerced by our prayer or piety, or dictated to in the name of faith. In the realm of sickness there remains the mystery of His permissive will which can allow sickness and suffering, and yet use them for His own good purposes. Lutheran charismatics should carefully avoid exaggerated or dubious claims in regard to any special gifts of the Spirit. These claims bring disrepute on themselves and on the whole Lutheran Church.

## D. PASTORAL ADVICE

In addition to the pleas presented above, the Church asks Lutheran charismatics to heed the following words, addressed in love.

1. While thanking God for the experience of the Spirit, His power and His gifts, they should test, judge, evaluate everything soberly in the light of God's Word and the Confessions, and not allow themselves to be controlled by undisciplined enthusiasm. They should learn what it means to live in their baptismal life, and, with every special experience and emotional height, turn to God's Word, to the Lord's Supper, in order to find objective assurance of the reality of the Spirit in their lives.
2. They should seek to avoid that judgementalism that is all too frequently a trait of charismatics who are ready to condemn all that is wrong in the Church without seeing or acknowledging what is right, and what the Holy Spirit is continuing to do even

where the Church may seem to be dead. They should be ready to accept informed criticism and reject any temptation to adopt a martyr complex because of rejection by members of the Church.

3. They should be prepared to give a good account of their faith which starts with God's Word, not with their personal experience, and be patient with those who do not immediately understand their experience, even if they are sure that it is of the Spirit and thus genuine and true. If others are browbeaten with charismatic enthusiasm, the result will often be immediate rejection, antagonism and opposition.
4. They should try to appreciate the rich heritage of the Lutheran Church, its Confessions, its liturgy, its hymns, its good traditions, for these have served the Church well for centuries. Necessary changes should be sought and urged with humility and gentleness of spirit, always recognising that there is room for different forms of piety, different liturgical and musical tastes. The new is not always better or of more lasting value than the old.
5. They should learn to live under the cross and so avoid a theology of glory which speaks only of the glory and power of God without the mystery of sin and the cross. The Spirit leads to the glory of the new life of faith in Christ, but always via Calvary and the confession of sin. True charismatic living is death to self and living in the shadow of the cross.
6. They should always respect the relationship of pastor and people with utmost integrity, and not work behind the back of their pastors. They should always seek the unity of faith in the bond of peace as all members of the Church heed the call to grow into Christ who is the Head of all.
7. Finally, and above all, Lutheran charismatics are asked to let Christ, His cross and bitter death, together with His glorious resurrection, remain the centre of their life, so that their spiritual life is one of continual union also with the Father and the Spirit.

## TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE LCA THE FOLLOWING PLEA IS ADDRESSED

1. Members of the Church should be prepared to listen to the concerns of charismatics, also when they are critical of present Church life. They should not prejudge or condemn in ignorance. All claims should be judged in the light of Scripture and the Confessions, not by traditionalism. They should seek to learn the true facts about charismatics and their teachings, and avoid false rumour.
2. Even where charismatic teaching is not fully understood, members of the Church should, with loving concern, hear those who claim to have had a special experience of the Spirit. They should avoid antagonising others with immediate rejection. A positive, pastoral attitude should be adopted so that there is no loveless polarisation. Where there is error, this should be rejected in no uncertain terms, but always in love for those in error and in the earnest attempt to win them back for the truth.
3. As well as showing patience and gentleness, and avoiding quick condemnation, members of the Church should try to understand the psychology which lies behind and attends a powerful spiritual experience, even if they are convinced that it arises from subjective emotionalism. It is still a very real experience for the person concerned. The charismatic should be sympathetically helped to evaluate his or her experience, and led to a deeper understanding of spiritual maturity.

4. While being prepared to listen to and learn from Lutheran charismatics, all members of the Church should be prepared to exercise a critical function in assisting them to reach a proper balance in the evaluation and use of special gifts. They should use the Spirit's gifts, at the same time preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. No Christian should feel deprived of the grace of God or left out of the Christian community, if no spectacular gift is granted to him.
5. All members of the LCA should continually pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in their own lives so that the old life of sin may more and more be overcome by the new life of the Spirit in Christ. They should also, continually pray that the whole Church, its leaders, pastors, teachers, and people may be filled with the Spirit, and that His gifts may be poured out richly on all. Thus the Church, empowered by the Spirit, will increasingly reflect the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ and glorify the Father.