

DOCTRINAL STATEMENTS AND THEOLOGICAL OPINIONS (DSTO)

VOLUME 1 E. THE SACRAMENTS

Infant communion

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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).

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'.