

THEOLOGICAL STUDY COMMISSION OF ELCSA(-T)

1997

HOLY COMMUNION

An aid towards the understanding and administering of Holy Communion

In previous years questions, concerning the understanding and administering of Holy Communion, arose in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa; questions, pertaining to the understanding of Holy Communion, and its procedure, within the Lutheran church family and the ecumenical context.

With this brochure we wish to help our congregations towards a better understanding Holy Communion, and a greater joy in participating in it. Furthermore we will point out some aspects which have to be valued at the celebration Of Holy Communion in the congregations.

1. WORD AND SACRAMENT:

According to the Lutheran understanding of Holy Scripture, Word and Sacrament have equal status: The proclamation Of the Word of God is a power of salvation (*'The message of the cross is the power of God'*. 1 Cor. 1:18), and entails sacramental properties; while the Sacrament, combined with Jesus Christ's name and words, is the Word manifest. This teaching of the Bible has to be reflected in practice.

Both, Word and Sacrament, are means of salvation. They mediate the same salvation, however, in different appearances. Christ grants himself in them. Both expect a response from us, namely faith. Both, Word and Sacrament, encounter us in human appearance:

The **preached** Word of God encounters us in human imperfect, and even fallible speech.

The **sacramental** Word of God encounters us in the simple material appearance of the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and water in Baptism.

Any understanding of Word and Sacrament depends on the understanding of God: That the great, exalted and blissful salvation comes by such pathetic means into our lives, has got its origin in God, becoming human *'Taking the very nature of a servant'* (Phil. 2:7). The conquered is the conqueror. The crucified is the risen Lord. The humiliation for the sake of love is not only part of the act of

salvation but also of the bestowing of salvation, of the means of salvation.

2. INSTITUTION AND PROMISE OF HOLY COMMUNION

By the promise of God we receive forgiveness of sin, life and salvation in the sacrament. *"These gifts are a comfort for the distressed, a medicine for the sick, a life for the dying, food for the hungry and a treasure for all wanting end in need."* (Luther).

2.1. JESUS HIMSELF INVITES TO HOLY COMMUNION (Mt. 11,28)

By the invitation of Christ to the Lord's Supper the congregation comes into being. Here, not human beings unite themselves, but rather the risen Lord unites, strengthens and maintains the many members of His body - His congregation: 'In the night when He was betrayed' Jesus instituted Holy Communion, that is the night before His crucifixion, when His body and blood were offered for a sinful human race, living in hostility with God (Rom.2).

Hence, Jesus desires to have fellowship with sinners, they are invited to participate; *'For he came to seek and to save the lost'* (Mk.2:13-17).

2.2. JESUS HIMSELF IS PRESENT..IN HOLY COMMUNION

Together with Luther's explanation in his Small Catechism, we confess the real presence of the crucified and risen Lord, Jesus Christ, in Holy Communion:

'It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself.'

In the form of bread and wine the true body and the true blood of Christ are present in Holy Communion; they are distributed and received in faith. However, we cannot fully comprehend this mystery.

2.3. THE HOLY COMMUNION IS A COMMEMORATING MEAL

'Do this in remembrance of me' has got nothing to do with an solemn death ritual, but rather allows the past event be present for us. This means that in Holy Communion the act of salvation of the past becomes present. Hence it becomes actual and effective through the ages, right into our lifetime. This happens because '*Jesus Christ (is) yesterday and today and the same in eternity*' (Hebr. 13:8).

By Holy Communion, however, not only the past becomes present, but also the act of salvation of the future becomes present. We base our hope on Jesus Christ to fulfil what He has initiated, namely to bring the world to it's final destination. The Holy Communion is thus also an experience of the coming joy and fellowship with God.

2.4. HOLY COMMUNION MEANS SUBMISSION

The words, '*This is My body, which is given for you; this is My blood, which is shed for you*', demonstrate the sacrificial death of Jesus: on the cross Jesus consecrates His life to God and thus dies for us, and seals the 'new Covenant' between God and man. By this act of love, Jesus Christ gives us His sacrificed body and His shed blood. Thus He takes us into the atonement with God and man, which was constituted on the cross of Christ, Hereby He grants us remission of sins - the greatest act of love ever Yet love awaits response. It calls us to follow Him and awaits our engagement with Him and our fellow men.

2.5 HOLY COMMUNION IS FELLOWSHIP

Whoever participates in Holy Communion enters the fellowship of Christ, and thus the human brotherly fellowship with all believers: '*is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.*' (1 Cor.10:16+ 17).

Holy Communion is the sacrament of unity This unity is based on the participation in the one bread, the one cup and therewith in the one Christ! It is not based on sympathy or equality of race, people, social class, education or any other human attribute. So the Holy Communion symbolises the essence of the Church, By the eating of the body of Christ and the drinking of His blood totally different people become His 'body', His congregation. This is explicit in the distribution of the 'broken bread' (wafers) and in the drinking out of the communal cup. Also the 'peace' is a sign of brotherly fellowship.

As Jesus dined with the sinners, the crucified, risen and exalted Christ has communion with the members of His congregation, He strengthens them in tribulation, and retains them to look forward in joyful expectation, towards the day of His advent.

3. THE VARIOUS FORMS OF HOLY COMMUNION

The celebration of Holy Communion has assumed a substantial variety of forms. Hence, it is appropriate to establish and maintain the innermost essence of the celebration. These are:

The Words of Institution: they constitute the core of the liturgy for the Holy Communion. As the words of Christ himself they are indispensable and maintain the focal point of the liturgy. Christ binds himself by His Word to the elements of bread and wine, and thus is 'in, with and under' them truly and fully present, The Words of Institution are used according to the wording in the Lutheran Altar Book.

The distribution of bread and wine in accordance with the institution of the Lord's Supper

Prayers of praise and thanks (preface, eucharist prayer, etc.), which exalt the triumphal salvation of God,

The Lord's Prayer

4. CALLING TO ADMINISTER HOLY COMMUNION

According to the Augsburg Confession, '*Nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call*' (Augsburg Confession, art.14). In our church this regular call is received by ordination. The ordained pastor has the right and duty to administer Holy Communion. Hence, he also bears responsibility for the whole celebration of Holy Communion. (This also applies for any person, who was duly called by a member church, to administer the Holy Communion under certain circumstances). His calling and responsibility are apparent when speaking the Words of institution at Holy Communion and administering the distribution. Church wardens and other congregational members may be asked by the pastor to assist him, They should be well prepared for this task.

5. THE PROCEDURE OF DISTRIBUTION AT HOLY COMMUNION

Holy Communion is celebrated in the Divine Service of the congregation, and usually received in groups at the altar. The communicants receive it kneeling down or standing. A further custom in celebrating Holy Communion is where the communicants proceed first to receive the body of Christ and then to receive the blood of Christ from another assistant. This form is called in German "*Wandelkommunion*".

The serving of bread and wine by handing it on from one to another in the pews is not advisable, for some may thereby feel urged to receive Holy Communion against their will. The bread and cup may be given into the hands, or served directly to the mouth of the communicant.

6. COMMUNAL CUP

The fellowship in Holy Communion is well expressed by the Communal Cup. Therefore this custom should in general be maintained.

In congregations, however, where the Communal Cup faces insurmountable reservations it is permissible to make use of the form of Chalice Communion but only in consultation with the Ecclesiastical Council of the church. In this case the '*cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks*' (1 Cor. 10:16), takes the form of a large cup with a lip from which the small chalices, which the communicants hold in their hands, are filled at the distribution, and the wine be drunk then immediately. In this way the communicants partake in the '*one cup*'. (This is no more the case if the wine was poured into the chalices beforehand and served on a tablet).

We urge congregations to persist on the Communal Cup, for it is in accordance with the institution of Holy Communion, and concurs with the evangelical Lutheran understanding thereof.

Wherever (in spite of hygienic precautions) individuals still have reservations, or if communicants, on their part, are mindful of infecting others, we recommend, as an exception in those cases, to receive only the bread. For, also by this one element the communicant fully receives the crucified and risen Lord. To **abstain** from the Cup is different than to if the Cup is being withheld. For abstaining from the cup the communicant might have different reasons: e.g, alcoholism, solidarity with alcohol endangered, or fear of infection.

In order not to restrain the joy of participation in Holy Communion by the fear of infection, hygienic requirements are to be maintained well. We therefore advise to use more than one silver or gold plated cup (not ceramic); because precious metals, in conjunction with alcohol have a disinfecting quality. According to professionals, AIDS is not transferred by the use of a common cup, as in Holy Communion.

Constantly turning the cup, and proper cleaning thereof, is essential, It is sensible to hand a clean cup to the celebrant after every five or six communicants.

Respecting the command of Christ, '*Drink ye all of it*', we regard it not permissible that whole congregations replace the drinking from the Communal Cup with intinction (dipping the bread into the cup); however, we do not exclude this practice (as an exception!) when an individual desires it.

7. WINE OR GRAPE JUICE

In our church we have the rule that Holy Communion, in accordance with Christ's institution and apostolic use, is celebrated with bread and wine. The use of grape juice has to remain *an* exception, rounded in the pastoral responsibility to alcoholics. In the congregation it is only permissible, either

parallel to communion with wine in the same Divine Service, or alternately. The congregation has to be informed of the procedure beforehand. In such case a consultation with the dean is appropriate. The exclusive use of grape juice would exclude those congregational members who appeal to the institution of Holy Communion and the custom of our church - therefore it is not permissible.

8. HOLY COMMUNION FOR THE SICK

During illness or physical weakness, Holy Communion can also be celebrated at home or in the clinic. The next of kin are invited to participate. The real presence of Christ in Holy Communion gives an encompassing sense of belonging, and generates confidence. Aged and sick people, who are unable to attend the Divine Service of the congregation, are taken out of isolation by Holy Communion in the house. They are reassured of their participation in Christ, and their belonging to the congregation. Therefore, we encourage pastors to celebrate special Holy Communion Services for the aged and infirm, either in the church or in the homes. It illustrates that the body of Christ is composed of strong and weak, healthy and ill members, those who can as well as those who cannot attend the gatherings of the congregation.

9. THE PROPER USE OF HOLY COMMUNION

Nobody is in himself worthy to partake of Holy Communion. Whoever, nevertheless, supposes that he has to be a 'good person', before he can participate in the Lord's Supper, has misunderstood the term 'unworthy' (1 Cor. 11:27). It is not a question of whether I am a sinner or not, but rather of the attitude that I as a sinner turn to the Lord for at the Lord's Table only people who do not deserve His company come together. Therefore, it is not the sinner who longs for forgiveness who is unworthy, but rather the satisfied hypocrite, who feels safe and sound with what he is and believes. Luther says in his Small Catechism, '*He is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins."*'.

10. CONFESSION AND HOLY COMMUNION

Although the Confession Service is no prerequisite for participation in Holy Communion, we are in need of opportunities to examine our lives, in order to realise our own guilt and sinfulness. Also, we are in need of the strength, emerging from the word of forgiveness (which is part of confession). Therefore, in every congregation Confession Services, well as private confession, should be offered. The Confession Service can be held before a Sunday Service, or as a separate Service (e.g. during the time of Lent, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, any Saturday evening, the evening before Confirmation, etc.).

The Bible, the Hymn Book and the Catechism are of precious assistance for the personal preparation for participation in Holy Communion. A visit to the pastor offers opportunity of personal confession and counselling.

11. HOLY COMMUNION. HOLY BAPTISM AND INTER-CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Holy Communion is the feast of those, called by Jesus into His fellowship. This calling is expressed in Holy Baptism. Therefore, Holy Baptism has, right from the beginning, been imperative for participation in Holy Communion. (cf. Small Catechism, 'For us Christians ... instituted by Christ Himself'). Hence, whoever forsakes the Church of Jesus Christ denies his baptism, and thus excludes himself from the fellowship of Holy Communion. If baptised members of other Christian denominations, who share the belief in Christ's presence, desire to take part in our celebration of Holy Communion they are cordially invited to do so. In the same spirit, members of our Church are free to be guests at the celebration of other Christian denominations, if they are invited. We, however, recommend to arrange oneself with the responsible pastor of that congregation. The requirement for permission to participation is the confession of believing in these words, '*Given and shed for you for the remission of sins.*' (Small Catechism part five).

In our church members of all evangelical Lutheran churches are welcome to take part in the celebrations of the Lord's Supper.

Note: Since 1969 we have explicit and declared fellowship in Word and Sacrament with evangelical Lutheran and the Moravian churches which are members of the 'Lutheran Communion in Southern Africa' (LUCSA) (cf, Appendix)

12. CHILDREN AT HOLY COMMUNION

Baptised children are, undoubtedly, part of the congregation of Jesus Christ. Hence, they may not principally be excluded from Holy Communion. At present, in our church, children participate in Holy Communion initially with their confirmation. It is however possible, that children participate in Holy Communion after prior instruction (e.g. during a confirmands camp). This should then only be put into practise after consultation with the congregational council, the congregation and the church president. The question Of permitting children, not yet confirmed, to participate in Holy Communion needs to be further explored.

The congregation bears responsibility to equip parents to assist their children in being part of the celebration of Holy Communion. Toddlers and children, at Holy Communion, may receive the blessing by the laying on of hands.

13. HOLY COMMUNION AND AGAPE FEAST

The Christian fellowship feast (Agape feast), expressing human fellowship, has clearly to be distinguished from Holy Communion. Holy Communion is not a meal to physically satisfy anybody, but rather Christ granting Himself 'in, with and under' bread and wine; whereas the Agape feast is a meal of fellowship, where in a special way the needy are thought of. The meal, therefor, is open to all (ie. also for unbaptised people), and has no established liturgical form.

14. 'TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD'

We invite those, responsible in the congregations for counselling, group discussions, congregational meetings, religious instruction and preaching, to constantly deliberate on the understanding of Holy Communion. We request congregations to encourage different forms of celebrating Holy Communion (e.g. 'Preparation of means of Grace', eucharist prayer, peace).

God, abundant in His grace. encounters us by a great variety of means: in the proclamation of His Word, in Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, confession and counselling. We have to share all His gifts in the congregations. We are grateful for every Divine Service, but hope that congregations will evermore celebrate regular Sunday Services with Holy Communion, May all members receive the invitation, 'taste and see that the Lord is good' (Ps.34:8).

Appendix:

Member Churches of the 'Lutheran Community in Southern Africa' (LUCSA)

ELCIN = Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (Ovambo-Kavango);

ELCRN = Evang.-Luth. Church in the Republic of Namibia (Rhenish Mission); Moravian Church

ELCZ = Evang.-Luth. Church in Zimbabwe; ELCB = Evang.-Luth. Church in Botswana,

ELCIN (DELK)= Evang.-Luth. Kirche in Namibia (Deutsche Ev.-luth. Kirche) ELCSA(Cape

Church)= Evang.-Luth. Church in Southern Africa (Cape Church); ELCM = Evang.-Luth. Church in Malawi;

ELCSA = Evang.-Luth. Church in Southern Africa;

ELCSA(N-T) = Evang.-Luth. Church in Southern Africa (Natal-Transvaal).