

MODES OF SACRAMENTAL RECEPTION

A Report by Lutheran Church–Canada’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations

The 2002 convention of Lutheran Church–Canada adopted Resolution 02.1.05a, asking “that the issue of the mode of sacramental reception with particular reference to whether ‘intinction’ or ‘Communion in one kind’ falls within the bounds of our Lord’s Words of Institution, the rest of Scripture and the Confessions, be referred to the CTCR for full study and response to the next Synodical Convention.” The convention expressed its concern that the brief mention of the issue in the document *Closed Communion in Contemporary Context*, received for reference and guidance by the 1999 Synodical Convention, was not germane to the central topic and deserved more extensive study.

The governing principle for the reception of the Lord’s Supper is declared in the Words of Institution: “Take, eat,” “Take, drink.” What is to be eaten and drunk are the bread and wine which are the Body and Blood of Christ. The question is: Do the parameters set forth in these words allow for intinction (the dipping of the bread into the chalice so that both Body and Blood are received at the same time) or Communion in one kind?

While an historical study of intinction could be done, and reasons why it is practiced in our churches set forth, the fact of its practice—whether widespread or practiced merely in isolated locations—in no way would determine whether it is permissible. The question of communion in one kind is far more significant, given the practice for many generations in Roman Catholicism of denying the cup to the laity. The issues here will simply be discussed on the basis of permissibility and pastoral care.

In a way, the issue of mode of reception comes perilously close to injecting law into the Gospel. The Gospel is that Christ gives us His Body and Blood to eat and to drink, and that we are to trust the words “for you,” and “for the forgiveness of sins.” The eating and drinking are based on the imperatives spoken by Christ, but those imperatives are set forth as invitation. They are not so much a command to “receive it in precisely this way,” but to take and receive it. The normal mode of reception is that both elements be received through eating and drinking, and certainly the precision of the words is to be taken seriously as both the historic practice of the Church and as His invitation to us. Neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions speak of other modes of reception. This should remain the basic practice of the Church, and nothing else be taught as such.

Nevertheless, we need to recognize that there may be times, in individual cases, when intinction may be acceptable, if the proper elements cannot be received by the individual in any other way. It is only to be used in extraordinary circumstances, under good and proper pastoral care for the individual. To deprive people of the benefits of the Body and Blood of Christ because they are not capable either of eating or drinking comes close to legalism. But the practice is not in any way to be encouraged as a normal mode of reception.

The confessions speak clearly against Communion in one kind, doing so in the context of Rome’s forbidding the laity to receive the cup. Nevertheless, Luther allowed the continuation of the practice in the early years of the Reformation in order that offense might not be given to tender consciences. Hence, while departing from the institution of the Sacrament as Christ instituted it, Luther was willing to act pastorally, and he did not see the practice as in itself invalidating the sacrament. The current question does not deal so much with forbidding the reception of the sacrament under both kinds, but on allowing it under certain circumstances, especially when there is a chemical or biological reaction between the individual’s body and the elements. Since the physical elements of bread and wine remain, any such reaction which would take place before the consecration of the elements might be expected to remain afterwards. If there is a reaction between an individual’s body and one or the other of the elements, pastoral care could indicate that reception of the other element alone might be considered as an option. This is not to be considered other than a concession to one’s physical condition, and not to be seen as normative in any way.

That being said, the option of abstaining from the Sacrament for those unable to receive one or the other of the elements must also be considered. We recognize that the gifts of the Sacrament—namely, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation—are available in other ways besides the Lord’s Supper, and our dogmaticians have noted

that what is necessary for salvation is also available in the other means of grace. While despising the Sacrament and refusing to receive it is a cause for spiritual concern, being physically unable to receive it should be grounds for turning attention to the other means of grace, where forgiveness, life and salvation are given: remembrance of one's baptism, and Holy Absolution.

To summarize, pastoral care may dictate that certain exceptions to the strict rule of eating and drinking the Body and Blood of our Saviour may be allowed which still make their reverent reception possible, if this is done with proper pastoral care, but that these exceptions are in no way to be made into a rule, but must be treated as exceptional circumstances.