

GUIDELINES FOR CONGREGATIONAL, DISTRICT, AND SYNODICAL COMMUNION STATEMENTS

The President of the Synod requested the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) to prepare guidelines for Communion statements for congregational, district, and synodical use. The request came to the CTCR after the president made numerous visits to District Conventions and congregations and witnessed a wide variety (and no small disparity) in statements addressing admission to the Lord's Supper.

The challenge of a godly, biblical Communion practice is great. Francis Pieper noted two potential errors of practice: "On the one hand they [churches and pastors] are not permitted to introduce 'Open Communion'; on the other hand, they must guard against denying the Sacrament to those Christians for whom Christ has appointed it."¹ "Open Communion," the admission of individuals to the Sacrament with minimal or no concern for Baptism, repentance, faith, self-examination, or unity of confession, is intolerable for any who take seriously that our Lord gave the Supper only to his disciples (Matt 26:20), Paul's plea that a church be of one mind or judgment and without division (1 Cor 1:10), and his insistence on self-examination and discerning the Lord's body (1 Cor 11:27-28). Just as intolerable is any approach to the Lord's Table which discourages repentant, confessing Christians from receiving the gifts of Christ or implies that only a select few Lutheran Christians are worthy and well-prepared to commune, as if reception is a reward for doctrinal orthodoxy or denominational affiliation. Recognizing such opposing errors, however, does not in itself resolve the practical, pastoral questions about how to administer Christ's Holy Supper faithfully or to communicate to both members and visitors biblical truths and concerns about proper, God-pleasing participation in the Lord's Supper.

The CTCR first issued guidelines for Communion statements in 1993. In the CTCR's letter to pastors dated February 22, 1993, the CTCR provided a "Model Communion Statement" consistent with its 1983 report, *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper*, and with 1986 Resolution 3-08 "To Maintain Practice of Close Communion." The letter accompanying the "Model Communion Statement" of 1993 stated, "The Commission hopes that you will find it helpful as you evaluate and/or develop your own announcements concerning admission to Holy Communion." This 1993 statement was officially "recommended to the member congregations of the Synod for guidance" by the Synod in convention 1995 Res. 3-08 "To Reaffirm the Practice of Close[d] Communion." We may also mention the CTCR 1999 report *Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching*.² Such documents and resolutions reflect the underlying respect for and concern with a theology and practice that is part of the long historic tradition of the church.³

The 1993 CTCR "Model Communion Statement" was intended to serve as an aid to congregations and pastors "as you evaluate and/or develop *your own announcements*" (emphasis added). Thus, although it has been used "as is" by some LCMS pastors and congregations, the model statement was certainly not intended to be considered either a final word on Communion statements for the LCMS or a perfect statement. However, it may continue to serve as a widely acceptable starting point in the development of guidelines for other additional Communion statements and for consideration of the matter of admission policies.

MODEL COMMUNION CARD STATEMENT

The Lord's Supper is celebrated at this congregation in the confession and glad confidence that, as he says, our Lord gives into our mouths not only bread and wine but his very body and blood to eat and to drink for the forgiveness of sins and to strengthen our union with him and with one another. Our Lord invites to his table those who trust his words, repent of all sin, and set aside any refusal to forgive and love as he forgives and loves us, that they may show forth his death until he comes.

Because those who eat and drink our Lord's body and blood unworthily do so to their great harm and because Holy Communion is a confession of the faith which is confessed at this altar, any who are not yet instructed, in doubt, or who hold a confession differing from that of this congregation and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and yet desire to receive the sacrament, are asked first to speak with the pastor or an usher.

For further study, see Matthew 5:23f.; 10:32f.; 18:15-35; 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:17-34.

It may be helpful to identify the significant emphases of this statement. A couple of general observations are important before looking at specifics, however. First, we note that the purpose of the statement is to facilitate a right and blessed receiving of the Sacrament. It attempts to do so by providing an unmistakable confession of the nature of the Supper and, then, who does and does not receive the Supper's intended blessing. This means, second, that the model is by no means relevant only to the "visitor," but to all who would commune. Third, the passages listed at the conclusion are not exhaustive of scriptural teaching on the matter of the Supper and right reception.

In more specific terms, we note the three major components of the statement. It addresses the nature of the Supper, then reception of it by individuals, and also considers the Supper as a confession of faith by a church. Under the heading of individual reception, both a blessed and a harmful reception are recognized and delineated.

THEOLOGICAL COMPONENTS FOR LUTHERAN COMMUNION PRACTICE

1. The Nature of the Lord's Supper ("our Lord gives into our mouths not only bread and wine but his very body and blood to eat and to drink")
 - a. The Sacrament is Christ's body and blood, given orally together with bread and wine, for the forgiveness of sins.⁴
 - b. Christ's body and blood is intended to benefit the communicant and the church, but it may be received to the harm of both individual and church.

2. The Sacrament's Benefit (or Harm) to Individuals ("for the forgiveness of sins and to strengthen our union with him and with one another")
 - a. Faith in Christ and his word is necessary for a blessed reception.
 - i. Faith in Christ and his word implies both baptism in the Triune Name and trust (faith) in Christ as Savior.⁵
 - ii. The communicant is then also called to believe Jesus' clear words that the Sacrament is his body and blood.⁶
 - iii. The repentant communicant has faith in the Lord's promise that in the Sacrament his or her sins are forgiven.⁷
 - iv. In trusting Christ's word, the believing communicant receives the promised forgiveness and is reaffirmed and strengthened in his or her union with Christ and other Christians.⁸
 - b. The source of harmful reception is unbelief or doubt in Christ's word.
 - i. The unbaptized and uninstructed person who does not yet know or believe in Christ and his promises is unprepared and should not commune.⁹
 - ii. The unrepentant person who does not seek Christ's forgiveness for sins—either general or particular—or refuses to forgive someone is unprepared and should not commune.¹⁰
 - iii. The doubting person who denies or is unconvinced of what Jesus says of his bodily presence in the sacrament or its promised forgiveness is unprepared and should not commune.¹¹
3. Communion, Communicant, and Church ("Holy Communion is a confession of the faith")
 - a. The church confesses its faith in Christ and the Gospel as it worships and as it communes.¹²
 - b. The person whose life is contrary to the teachings of the communing assembly introduces harmful division if he or she communes.¹³
 - c. The person whose confession of faith (his or her personal beliefs and/or the public confession made through his or her affiliation with a particular church body) is contrary to the communing assembly ("to the faith which is confessed at this altar") introduces the possibility of doubt, confusion, and potentially harmful division if he or she communes.¹⁴

- d. As “the steward of the mysteries of God,” the pastor is called by God through the congregation to ensure faithful administration of the Supper.

A final observation is in order about the Model Communion Statement. The statement is obviously intended to inform individuals who may wish to commune about the congregation’s understanding of the Sacrament and to help them decide whether to come to receive it. As such, it fits fully into the scriptural admonition, “Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Co 11:28). This individual self-examination is paramount for right preparation and a blessed reception of the Sacrament. Such personal responsibility should not be misunderstood, however. There is also a responsibility for the congregation, acting especially through its pastor, in the matter of admission to the Supper. This responsibility flows especially out of love for the individual who might commune to his or her harm.¹⁵ For that reason the model urges that in any uncertainties about Communion, individuals should “speak with the pastor or an usher” (with the presumption that the latter would direct the person to the pastor) before partaking.

The preceding comments and the specific points identified within the components are intended to be of further help in the original goal of the Model Communion Statement, to aid in the evaluation and crafting of Communion announcements or statements.

SAMPLE STATEMENTS

In that regard, we are providing a sampling of Communion statements that are representative of some of those in use in the LCMS. Each statement is followed by brief comments in light of the preceding discussion.¹⁶

Statement 1

Admission to Holy Communion is by invitation of the Lord, presented through the Church to those who are baptized. Visitors who are baptized and who trust that Christ is truly present in this sacrament are welcome to join us at the Lord's Table.

Comments: This statement is welcoming, but unhelpfully brief. It says almost nothing about the nature of the Sacrament, without any reference to Christ’s body and blood. It also fails to say anything of either the benefit of the Sacrament (forgiveness) or of the possibility of receiving the body and blood to one’s judgment. Baptism is required as is trust in Christ’s presence, but that presence is unclear. Where is Christ not present? Thus, faith in Christ or his words is only vaguely implied. This statement also fails to address the confessional aspect of the Supper.

Statement 2

If you have never communed at this altar, please introduce yourself to our pastor so that he may hear your faith before we share Communion with you. We follow the biblical and apostolic practice of closed Communion. This practice respects Communion as an expression of full unity in doctrine and practice of all who partake. It also assures that no one receives Communion to their condemnation. Only members in good standing of congregations of The Lutheran Church

Missouri Synod (LCMS) which also practice closed Communion are welcome to receive Communion at this altar.

Comments: This statement takes to heart the importance of preventing harmful reception of the Sacrament. Its tone is one of stern warning addressed only to visitors with no guidance for members. No mention is made of the nature of the Sacrament as Christ's body and blood or of his promise of forgiveness or the opportunity of strengthening one's faith. Communion participation is seemingly based entirely on being a member of an LCMS congregation—and only some of them (those that practice closed Communion in the manner that this congregation practices it). Since no attention is given to repentant self-examination or to faith in Christ's words of promise, this statement may actually foster unworthy communing.

Statement 3

The Communion Confession

I believe that I am a sinner. I repent of my sin and ask God's forgiveness. With his help I will amend my sinful life. I believe that Jesus Christ is my only Lord and Savior from sin, Satan, and death. I believe that the risen Christ is really present in the Sacrament and, under the form of the bread and the wine, I receive his true body and blood for the forgiveness of my sin and the strengthening of my faith and life. I resolve to dedicate my life to the service of my Lord by regular group worship, sacrificial giving, thankful living, and sharing the Gospel with others.¹⁷

Comments: This statement invites thoughtful self-examination. It addresses the nature of the Sacrament and speaks of its benefit, the forgiveness of sins. While personal faith is emphasized, there is no mention of being baptized. Unaddressed as well is the matter of the Sacrament as confession of faith and thus, its churchly character and its intent toward unity. While thoroughly individual in nature, the statement also misses important individual needs. It leaves unanswered the questions or concerns of an individual with a troubled conscience too weak to make bold resolutions or fearful that he can give sacrificially enough, be thankful enough, or share the Gospel often enough. It may then keep such persons away from an acknowledged source of strengthened "faith and life." Similarly, the individual with uncertain beliefs or doubts is left without any guidance or invitation to seek the aid and counsel of a pastor. Lastly, individuals whose beliefs are inconsistent with or contrary to the congregation's confession in areas other than the Supper—Baptism, for instance—are left to assume that such differences pose no obstacle to the unity of the altar.

Statement 4

The Lord's Supper: God's Word teaches the real presence of Christ's body and blood invisibly in, with and under the bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins. We take seriously the spiritual care of those who commune at our altar. The Word of God states that no one offend against Christ and His Word by denying His true presence and its promise and seal of forgiveness. Because those who eat and drink our Lord's body and blood unworthily do so to their great harm (see 1 Cor. 11:27-29), and because Holy Communion is a confession of what is taught and believed at this altar (1 Cor. 11:26), any who are not yet instructed, in doubt, or who hold a

confession (beliefs) differing from that of this congregation (that is, belong to another church body or denomination) and yet desire to receive the sacrament, will want to first speak with the pastor before communing. As a courtesy, guests from sister congregations of the LCMS or from congregations of the American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC) are also asked to introduce themselves to the pastor before communing.

Comments: This statement speaks about the nature of the Sacrament, its benefits, and its churchly character as a confession of faith by the assembly. While indicating the benefit of the Sacrament, it gives greatest attention to the potential that the Supper can be received to the harm of individuals. It asks all those who are visiting to speak with the pastor, identifying those who share the same beliefs as the congregation and urging pastoral counsel for the uninstructed, doubtful, or those with other beliefs. While referring to all “who commune at our altar,” it does not directly address the importance of repentant faith for every communicant.

Statement 5¹⁸

A Christmas Communion Statement: The coming of Christ in the flesh at Bethlehem was a concrete outward act of God in humble means that was despised by the world. The flesh and blood coming of Christ in the sacrament is also a concrete outward act of God in humble means that can be despised. Rather than despise it, however, God would have us delight in it! With deep thankfulness for His gifts to us here we also express our deep desire to celebrate it according to God's Will. As this includes oneness in the faith we confess (doctrine), guests who desire to commune are asked to speak with the pastor before the service.

Comments: This seasonal announcement addresses the nature of the Supper with a beautiful link between the Incarnation and the Sacrament. The statement is helpful for members and guests alike. Little further teaching about the Lord's Supper or its benefit is provided, but unity of confession is emphasized together with the need for guests to speak to the pastor before communing.

Statement 6

An Easter Communion Statement: In the Lord's Supper, the Risen Christ is at once the Giver and the Gift! By His promise His very body and blood are really present; and thereby we come into immediate contact with the exalted Christ! As we do so, witness is also given to oneness in doctrine by those who receive the Sacrament together. For this reason, we practice close(d) Communion and kindly ask guests to speak with the pastor before the service.

Comments: Once again a seasonal connection to the Sacrament is made that is helpful for all who read it. The presence of Christ's body and blood in the Supper is affirmed, but without specific mention of the benefit of forgiveness. Oneness in doctrine is emphasized and guests are again asked to speak to the pastor.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing examples and comments are not provided to point fingers, chide, or be picayune. The purpose is to illustrate how theological components underlying the CTCR's model statement can be used for evaluative purposes. Moreover, the Model Communion Statement itself is by no means perfect. It neglects to mention Baptism. Further, it could have clarified "who hold[s] a confession different from the congregation and LCMS by mentioning membership in a different church body. It could also clarify those "not yet instructed" as those who have not been confirmed or admitted to communion at their home congregations.

In addition, the Model Communion Statement is most directly pointed toward the visitor and is seemingly less helpful for the self-examination of member communicants. The CTCR recognizes that the focus of Communion statements tends overwhelmingly to be toward non-member guests or visitors. We acknowledge that this tendency is perfectly understandable, given the fact that there is so much variety among Christians and also within the LCMS on the question of who should be invited to commune. Nevertheless, the matter of admission to the Supper should not be so heavily focused on one particular problem (a problem that is by definition going to involve only a small number of visitors) that it may neglect the weightier reality that *all* who commune are called to be worthy and well-prepared.

It is the CTCR's hope that the guidelines provided here will help our pastors and congregations toward the goal of unity in our understanding of the Lord's Supper and in local practices that are in keeping with that teaching. This indeed would mean that Communion statements should be carefully considered and crafted in a way that is consistent with our theology. But the CTCR also emphasizes that as helpful as a well-crafted, doctrinally sound Communion statement may be, it cannot replace pastoral care. Indeed, perhaps the single most helpful "Communion message" for guests that is consistent with Lutheran teaching and practice is that they should speak with the pastor before communing. (Of course, this means that the pastor needs to find ways to make himself available for this important responsibility.) In that way the pastor can, on a personal level, exercise his responsibility as a steward of Christ's mysteries (1 Cor 4:1) to provide the sort of spiritual care implied by the confessional term, "examination." The pastor is called to care for the soul. In gentle, loving interaction with visitors who inquire about participation in the Supper, he can provide spiritual care to them. Yet, this care for souls is not for visitors alone. Ongoing teaching and preaching about the Sacrament—its nature, benefits, and confessing character—is far more important than any written announcement. Such proclamation is pastoral care for a church's members and will not only help them rightly to commune, it will also help them to assist in spiritual care for others as they invite guests to worship, explain Lutheran convictions and beliefs to their visiting family members and friends, and encourage them to take Communion and confession to heart.

¹ *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 381.

² The report is available in hard copy from Concordia Publishing House or in electronic format at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=411>.

³ See Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, Norman E. Nagel, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966).

⁴ The term “real presence” has come into common use among Lutherans to describe what is distinctive about Lutheran teaching on the Lord’s Supper. We should recognize, however, that while there is a Lutheran understanding of Christ’s real presence—namely, his bodily sacramental presence in the bread and wine—other Christians also refer to the “real presence” of Christ in the Sacrament but mean something different. As an Anglican theologian quipped recently: “A spiritual presence is still a real presence.” This document therefore avoids that term. See Albert B. Collver, “‘Real Presence’: An Overview and History of the Term,” *Concordia Journal* (2002): 142–159. “Everyone seems to affirm some kind of doctrine of the real presence. Luther taught the real presence. Calvin taught the real presence. The Reformed Church teaches the real presence. The Roman Catholic Church teaches the real presence. The Anglican Church teaches the real presence. The great accomplishment of the ecumenical discussions in the twentieth century was the recognition that, despite whatever has been the historical teaching of a particular confession of the Lord’s Supper, everyone in fact confesses the real presence. This is made clear in the Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry (B.E.M.) document of 1982. All Christian churches that accept the B.E.M. document indeed confess the real presence. What then is the real presence? B.E.M. does not provide us with an answer, but simply assures us that everyone confesses the real presence. This assurance of the real presence suggests that there are no remaining obstacles (or at least no insurmountable obstacles) which hinder Eucharistic fellowship among the church bodies.” (Collver 143.)

⁵ It should be noted that while the Model Communion Statement does not make explicit mention of Holy Baptism, our Lord’s clear words that to be his disciple one is to be baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19) and his promise, “Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16) remind us that the Supper he gives is for those who through baptismal faith are his disciples.

⁶ Mt 26:26-28; Mk 14:22-24; Lk 22:19-20; 1 Co 10:16; 11:23-25.

⁷ Note the sacrificial atonement emphasized in our Lord’s words about the Supper as they are preserved by the various NT authors: Mt 26:28b “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”; Mk 14:24 “poured out for many”; Lk 22:19 “my body, which is given for you” and Lk 22:20 “This cup that is poured out for you”; 1 Co 11:24b “for you.”

⁸ Here as always faith alone receives God’s gracious promises (Rom 4:13-17; Gal 3:22).

⁹ Although the language sounds harsh to our ears, those who are not baptized and believing disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ are idolaters, having some god other than the one true God. Paul’s warning in 1 Co 10:14-22 then applies. See also Hb 13:10, the passages in endnote 3, and the discussion in endnote 10.

¹⁰ 1 Co 5:6-13. See also the discussion in endnote 11.

¹¹ 1 Co 11:27-32. Although this passage never says, in so many words, “you should not commune,” the unavoidable implication of these verses is to call a halt to unworthy communing. Note that Paul is writing to fellow Christians (“brothers” 11:33) with deep pastoral concern, seeking to show them what is wrong and to correct them. They are under judgment and discipline (11:29-32). Yet, the purpose is not so much that they would not commune, but that they would commune worthily, examining and judging themselves (11:28, 30) “so that we may not be condemned along with the world” (11:32). Thus he distinguishes between judgment and condemnation: (v. 29) ὁ γὰρ ἐσθίων καὶ πίνων **κρίμα** ἑαυτῷ· ἐσθίει καὶ πίνει μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα; (v. 32) κρινόμενοι δὲ ὑπὸ [τοῦ] κυρίου παιδευόμεθα, ἵνα μὴ σὺν τῷ κόσμῳ **κατακριθῶμεν**. Not irrelevant to Paul’s warning is the one from Hebrews 10:28-31. There the writer warns of spurning the Son of God and profaning his blood. This risks the fearful reality of condemnation: “fall[ing] into the hands of the living God.”

¹² 1 Co 11:26.

¹³ 1 Co 11:17-34. Jeffrey Gibbs shows that the “overt sin” in Corinth was moral in nature. Paul condemns those guilty of the overt sin of a loveless attitude toward others, turning the Supper into a gluttonous, drunken gathering while providing nothing for the poor who come later to the table. The underlying concern of Paul, however, is to address the primary issue—the problem that these Corinthians are not discerning the Supper’s reality as Christ’s bodily presence. See Gibbs, “‘The Body for the Body’: 1 Cor 11:17-34 and Pastoral Practice in the Local

Congregation” (unpublished paper presented at “Common Ground” Forum, Pacific Southwest District, Jan 14-15, 1997, p. 8). On file in the office of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

¹⁴ 1 Co 11:26. See also 1 Co 1:10; Eph 4:1-3; Phil 1:27. Doubt or confusion are significant dangers of failing to address the confessional aspect of the Supper “For we do not intend to admit to the sacrament and administer it to those who do not know what they seek or why they come” (LC VI:2). “However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words ‘for you’ require truly believing hearts” (SC VI:9-10). See pages 32-38 and 41-46 of the CTCR’s report *Admission to the Lord’s Supper* for a more extensive discussion of “communion as confession.”

¹⁵ The harm caused by unworthy eating of the body and blood of Christ described by Saint Paul includes, not only, judgment (κρίμα; v.29) but also weakness (ἀσθενής; v. 30), illness (ἄρρωστος; v. 30), and, in some cases, death (κοιμάομαι; v. 30). One of the reasons partakers of the Lord’s Supper are instructed first is so that they do not sin against the body and blood of Christ in ignorance and thereby receive judgment that may include weakness, illness, and death instead of “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation” (see SC 5). Therefore, when a person does not recognize or denies that the body and blood of Christ is given in the Lord’s Supper, the pastor as a “steward of the mysteries of God” has a responsibility to prevent the person from receiving the body and blood of Jesus to his judgment and harm.

¹⁶ Some of these statements were shared in whole or in part with CTCR staff members. Others appeared in various online discussions. Still others are from congregational visits. All have been modified to some extent in order to avoid the names of pastors or congregations, to correct grammar, and to remove extraneous matters (e.g., references to the manner of distribution, to the use of individual cups versus the chalice, to availability of low/no alcohol wine, and so forth).

¹⁷ This is an example of a very common statement which is often presented in the form of several questions. The questions ask for a Yes or No response and those who answer all the questions with a Yes are then welcomed to the Table.

¹⁸ Statements 5 and 6 are from a helpful booklet that provides both Communion announcements and artwork that is seasonal in nature, *Lord May Your Body and Your Blood Be For My Soul the Highest Good* by Rev. Kenneth Wieting (originally published in 1990, now available from Luther Memorial Chapel and University Center, 3833 N Maryland Ave., Shorewood, WI 53211).

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