

Officiating at the Lord's Supper: Changes in the Teaching and Practice of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

INTRODUCTION:

In an unpublished 2006 essay on "The Doctrine of the Lord's Supper," Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Professor Forrest Bivens admits that on the question of who may or should be allowed to officiate at the administration of the Lord's Supper, "It seems safe to say that the degree of sensitivity among our people on this issue is different than it was thirty or forty years ago..." The current teaching of the seminary faculty on which Bivens serves, in regard to this matter, is summarized in the *Dogmatics Notes* that are used in classes there: "Concerning the administration of the Lord's Supper, we also maintain that when the necessary conditions of good order (1 Co 14:40) and brotherly love (1 Co 16:14) have been observed, a non-ordained Christian layman (e.g., an elder, vicar, student of theology, male teacher or staff minister) who has been properly designated and trained to perform this function may serve." This endorsement of allowing these various non-pastors to officiate at the Lord's Supper is not qualified by the provision that such an arrangement should be contemplated only in the case of an emergency, or only in an exceptional circumstance. This more liberal position – described by Bivens as a different "degree of sensitivity" – reflects a demonstrable change in teaching and practice that has taken place within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, as compared to the more conservative position to which the synod previously held, and to which the more conservative elements in the synod apparently still do hold. This change can be documented by means of the quotations that follow, from past and present authorities in the synod, whose more traditional Lutheran approach on this question is not in harmony with the more lax approach of the current *Dogmatics Notes*.

ADOLF HOENECKE, 1908:

The administration of the Lord's Supper is the responsibility of none but the ordained servants of the church. According to Scripture, in the regular course of events, the regularly called servants of the church are the administrators of the mysteries of God, and only in real emergency cases may the lay people also administer them. According to Scripture, there is no such emergency case in regard to the Lord's Supper as there is in regard to Baptism. Our dogmatists, therefore, have decided that if a sick person desires the Lord's Supper and a pastor cannot be reached, we should convince him that spiritual partaking is enough for him and that more anxiety than comfort must come from a partaking of the Lord's Supper that departs from the order of God. More on this point is to be found in discussions of casuistry. There are also differing views among the Lutheran dogmatists. (*Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Volume IV [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999], pp. 140-41)

IRWIN J. HABECK, 1968:

Need the right to officiate at the Lord's Supper be restricted to the theologically trained clergyman? As far as the proclamation of the Word is concerned, there can be little question that in our day the aptitude to teach which the Lord sets down as a qualification for the office of a bishop does require theological training. I am not thinking only of the formal sermon in the worship service, but also of

the varied areas of teaching, the devotional addresses at organization meetings, and the devotions with the sick and shut-ins. I believe, too, that this training is requisite for the capable performers of the vast variety of pastoral duties. This applies also to the stewardship of the Lord's Supper, which involves not only granting it to those who are entitled to receive it, but also withholding it from those who are not entitled to receive it. ("Who May Officiate at the Lord's Supper?", *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 3 [July 1968], p. 201)

What about having a theological student assist with the distribution of the Lord's Supper or in an emergency even to function alone? Again it is a case where the pastor delegates this function which has been entrusted to him to another in a given situation. True, the qualifications of the student for the public ministry have not yet been established by his being presented to the church as a candidate for the holy ministry. But this does not involve a permanent call to exercise all of the functions of a pastor but only a very limited assignment. The fact that a man is a student in good standing at our Seminary will be accepted as evidence that he possesses the general qualifications which the Lord requires for the exercise of any public function in the church. If, however, there should be a question on the part of any congregation about having a student officiate at the Lord's Supper, charity would demand that the question be discussed and the arrangement continued only if unanimity has been attained. As said before, charity, which includes the avoiding of offense, must be exercised in all arrangements for the worship life of the church. ("Who May Officiate at the Lord's Supper?", *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 3 [July 1968], pp. 197-98)

Note that Habeck envisions a seminary student's officiating at the Lord's Supper to be something that might happen only "in an emergency."

There yet remains the question of Christians in isolation. If there are two or three in a similar plight in the same general location, far removed from a church or pastor of their confession, may they agree to celebrate the Lord's Supper together? My answer would be a guarded Yes. First of all I would advise that they make sure that their isolation is real. The fact that it would take some effort to get to a congregation or a pastor of their faith in itself would not be cogent. Effort and sacrifice are not to be eliminated from the Christian's vocabulary. But if the isolation is real, we must bear in mind that the Lord says: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). Where He is, the Keys are, also the right to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

I remarked, however, that my Yes was guarded. Even if circumstances do warrant that Christians in isolation exercise their spiritual priesthood by arranging for their own communion service, the principles to which we referred before ought not be ignored. If they are so earnest in their Christianity that they will avoid communing with the heterodox, it may be supposed that they will have maintained membership in their home congregations. Then order requires that they inform their home congregations of their plight and of their intentions and do not act without their knowledge and consent. The counsel ought to be forthcoming that they designate one or two of their group to officiate, but be sure that they know what is proper in the celebration of the Lord's Supper and be conscientious stewards of the Sacrament. In effect they will be forming temporarily their own congregation and calling someone qualified from their own midst to officiate.

If these cautions must be sounded in the case of even mature Christians in isolation, there is all the more reason to sound them in the case of military personnel. Age is no guarantee of spiritual maturity, to be sure, nor youth evidence of spiritual immaturity. But the Lord does warn against entrusting the bishop's office to a novice (I Tim. 3:6). The home pastor who informs a youth of his privilege must also impress upon him the solemnity of celebrating the Lord's Supper, especially the need for good order and for the conscientious stewardship which involves close communion. One need only read the solemn words which the Lord spoke through St. Paul when the communion practice at Corinth had degenerated to realize how relevant these words of caution are.

We must underscore the reminder too that what is done in an emergency, as a case of casuistry, dare not become the basis for a general practice. ("Who May Officiate at the Lord's Supper?", *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 65, No. 3 [July 1968], pp. 204-05)

Note that Habeck underscores the fact that these extraordinary arrangements would be contemplated, and possibly implemented, only "in an emergency."

THOMAS P. NASS, 1994:

It is a Lutheran commonplace that a lay Christian could administer baptism in the case of an emergency. He could do this because all Christians have the ministry of the keys.

However, Lutheran teachers have debated throughout the years whether or not a lay person should ever consecrate and administer the Lord's Supper. The orthodox dogmatists generally said that even in the case of emergency it should not be done. Baier wrote: "When there is a lack of ordinary ministers, and a faithful man anxiously desires this sacrament, it is better for him to be persuaded that spiritual eating is sufficient and to show the danger of other temptations which could arise if the sacrament were administered by another without a legitimate call and therefore with a dubious mind and result."

In the WELS I assume we follow the line of thinking of Prof. Habeck in his article, "Who May Officiate at the Lord's Supper?" He says that if there are Christians in genuine isolation, far removed from a church or pastor of their confession, a "guarded yes" could be given to them to celebrate the Lord's Supper, assuming they know what is proper. WELS soldiers in World War II were sometimes instructed on how they could celebrate communion in the war zones.

Still, as a general practice the administration of the sacraments in our congregations is entrusted to those in the pastoral ministry. Certainly others may be asked to help distribute the Lord's Supper. But pastors are asked to oversee and preside. I know of no one advocating that this responsibility be given to others.

This work fits well with the role of the pastor as the spiritual overseer. The administration of the Lord's Supper, for example, often involves spiritual judgment. Decisions commonly need to be made by the administrant about who is properly prepared to receive the sacrament, both in the public worship services and in the visitation of shut-ins. This requires a knowledge of the sheep and is definitely the work of spiritual oversight. ("The Pastoral Ministry as a Distinct Form of the Public Ministry," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 91, No. 4 [Fall 1994], p. 262)

JOHN F. BRUG, 2009:

Speaking of his stewardship of the gospel, Paul says, "Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things [the mysteries] of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Co 4:1,2). The mysteries of God are commonly understood to include the sacraments. The power of the sacraments is not dependent on ordination or on the person of the administrator, but the pastor is responsible for how the sacraments are administered.

The administration of the Lord's Supper involves spiritual judgment. Decisions commonly need to be made by the administrator about who is properly prepared to receive the Sacrament, both in public worship services and in the visitation of shut-ins. At times, there is a responsibility to exclude some from receiving the Sacrament. This requires a shepherd's knowledge of the sheep, and it is definitely the work of spiritual oversight. This means that administration of the Lord's Supper will normally remain with the pastor, even if others are trained to assist him with the distribution. The kind of disorder that arose in the Lord's Supper at Corinth is most easily prevented if the administration is in the hands of properly prepared pastors.

Lutheran teachers have debated whether or not a layperson should ever consecrate and administer the Lord's Supper. Many orthodox dogmaticians said that even in the case of emergency, this should not be done. They felt that the need for the Lord's Supper was never a true emergency like the need for Baptism. As an example, Baier is cited: "When there is a lack of ordinary ministers, and a faithful man anxiously desires this sacrament, it is better for him to be persuaded that spiritual eating is sufficient and to show the danger of other temptations which could arise if the sacrament were administered by another without a legitimate call and therefore with a dubious mind and result." This may be considered to be a reasonable opinion, but we cannot demonstrate that it is an absolute, scriptural rule. How about a third choice: an orderly call to a member of the group to serve as the temporary pastor of the group. Cases of war and extreme isolation might provide exceptional cases. But even in the cases of isolated members, we make a concerted effort to reach them with pastoral care for the sacraments.

There is no doubt that laypeople can perform valid baptisms in cases of emergency. But since Baptism is the sacrament of initiation through which people enter the church, under normal circumstances it is administered by the called ministers of the church in the name of the church. (*The Ministry of the Word* [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009], pp. 118-19)

Note the point of comparison that Brug makes. He contrasts what is "normally" done – that is, that the administration of the Lord's Supper is carried out by "properly prepared pastors" – with what might be allowed in "exceptional cases," such as a time of "war" or when a group of Christians is in "extreme isolation."

It is clear that the Lord's Supper should be administered by the pastor. It is not our practice to have a layman officiate at the Lord's Supper. Even when congregations were quite isolated and some did not have a pastor present every Sunday, the Lord's Supper was celebrated only when the pastor was present. Proper administration of the Lord's Supper involves more than being able to read the right words. It involves pastoral responsibility for the souls of those who attend. (*The Ministry of the Word* [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009], p. 221)