

The Orderly Administration of the Lord's Supper in Confessional Lutheranism and in the Synods of the Former Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference



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Before the Reformation, the Roman Church had come to redefine the essence of the Christian liturgy as basically a series of sacrifices and sacrificial rituals that the church and its ordained priesthood offer to God. On the basis of the New Testament the Lutheran Reformers corrected this misconception, and declared in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession that among the Lutherans,

priests are not called to offer sacrifices for the people as in Old Testament law so that through them they might merit the forgiveness of sins for the people; instead they are called to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments to the people.

The issuing of such calls to such men was not seen as optional, since “the church has the mandate to appoint ministers, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it” (XIII:9, 12, K/W). Martin Luther furthermore explained in the Large Catechism that such men are our true “spiritual fathers,” who “govern and guide us by the Word of God” and “watch over” our souls (I: 158, 161, K/W). The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope was also speaking of such men when it declared that “The gospel” – that is, the New Testament revelation –

bestows upon those who preside over the churches the commission to proclaim the gospel, forgive sins, and administer the sacraments. In addition, it bestows legal authority, that is, the charge to excommunicate those whose crimes are public knowledge and to absolve those who repent. It is universally acknowledged, even by our opponents, that this power is shared by divine right by all who preside in the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops. (60-61, KW)

And the Evangelical Lutheran Synod is still speaking of such men when, in its 2005 doctrinal statement on *The Public Ministry of the Word*, it declares – concerning “The Pastoral Office in its Various Manifestations” – that

God commands that properly called men publicly preach, teach, administer the sacraments, forgive and retain sins, and have oversight of doctrine in the name of Christ and the church (1 Timothy 2:11-12). Therefore a presiding office, whether it is called that of pastor, shepherd, bishop, presbyter, elder or by any other name, is indispensable for the church (Luke 10:16, 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, Matthew 28:18-20, Hebrews 13:17, Acts 20:28, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 5:1-2).

The Public Ministry of the Word also states that “In the Lutheran Confessions ordination is understood as the rite by which the church confirms a man to be suitable for a call to the pastoral office (SA Part III, Art. X, Treatise 66–69).”

The intimate relationship that properly exists between the ministry of the church’s pastors, and the church’s worship, was made clear in the Apology’s explanation that

the term “liturgy”...does not really mean a sacrifice but a public service. Thus it squares with our position that a minister who consecrates shows forth the body and blood of the Lord to the people, just as a minister who preaches shows forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says (1 Cor. 4:1), “This is how one should regard us, as ministers of Christ and dispensers of the sacraments of God,” that is, of the Word and sacraments; and 2 Cor. 5:20, “We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Thus the term “liturgy” squares well with the ministry. (XXIV: 79-81, Tap)

The Apology also stated that those who

hold office in the church...represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], “Whoever

listens to you listens to me.” When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ. (VII/VIII:28, K/W).

The “sacramental” character of good Lutheran preaching, in contrast to the kind of preaching one would generally have heard in Reformed churches, was described in the early twentieth century by George Henry Gerberding:

To the Lutheran the sermon, as the preached Word, is a means of grace. Through it the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth. It is a constant offer of pardon; a giving of life, as well as a nourishing and strengthening of life. In the Reformed churches the sermon is apt to be more hortatory and ethical. It partakes more of the sacrificial than of the sacramental character. The individuality of the preacher, the subjective choice of a text, the using of it merely for a motto, the discussion of secular subjects, the unrestrained platform style, lack of reverence, lack of dignity, and many other faults are common, and are not regarded as unbecoming the messenger of God in His temple. Where there is a properly trained Lutheran consciousness such things repel, shock, and are not tolerated. (Gerberding, 277-78)

What the reclaimed and cleansed order of the mass, or Lutheran Divine Service, looked and sounded like in the majority of Lutheran territories and cities in the sixteenth century, was described elsewhere in the Apology:

...we do not abolish the Mass but religiously retain and defend it. Among us the Mass is celebrated every Lord’s day and on other festivals, when the sacrament is made available to those who wish to partake of it, after they have been examined and absolved. We also keep traditional liturgical forms, such as the order of readings, prayers, vestments, and other similar things. ... Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies. We keep the Latin for the sake of those who learn and understand it. We also use German hymns in order that the [common] people might have something to learn, something that will arouse their faith and fear. (XXIV:1, 3, K/W)

The examination and absolution mentioned here as components in a communicant’s preparation for receiving the Lord’s Supper, were explained in more detail in Luther’s *Formula Missae* of 1523. Concerning the examination, Luther wrote that the “bishop” or pastor should

be informed of those who want to commune. They should request in person to receive the Lord’s Supper so that he may be able to know both their names and manner of life. And let him not admit the applicants unless they can give a reason for their faith and can answer questions about what the Lord’s Supper is, what its benefits are, and what they expect to derive from it. In other words, they should be able to repeat the Words of Institution from memory and to explain that they are coming because they are troubled by the consciousness of their sin, the fear of death, or some other evil, such as temptation of the flesh, the world, or the devil, and now hunger and thirst to receive the word and sign of grace and salvation from the Lord himself through the ministry of the bishop, so that they may be consoled and comforted; this was Christ’s purpose, when he in priceless love gave and instituted this Supper, and said, “Take and eat,” etc.

But I think it enough for the applicants for communion to be examined or explored once a year. Indeed, a man may be so understanding that he needs to be questioned only once in his lifetime or not at all. For, by this practice, we want to guard lest the worthy and unworthy alike rush to the Lord’s Supper... (LW 53:32-33)

And Luther wrote, “concerning private confession before communion,” that “it neither is necessary nor should be demanded. Nevertheless, it is useful and should not be despised...” (LW 53:34) In a sermon from 1531 Luther also said that

To confess sin does not mean (as among the papists) to recite a long catalog of sins, but to desire absolution. This is in itself a sufficient confession, that is, acknowledging yourself guilty and confessing that you are a sinner. And no more should be demanded and required, no naming and recitation of all or some, many or a few sins, unless you of your own accord desire to indicate something that especially burdens your conscience and calls for instruction and advice or specific comfort... (quoted in WLS I:331)

With few exceptions, it was the standard practice among the Lutherans of this period for the full Divine Service to be held on each Sunday, and also on other occasions as needed, if there were communicants who wished to partake of the Lord's Supper and who were properly prepared to do so. When in 1528 the city of Nürnberg, through Lazarus Spengler, sought Luther's guidance on when and how the Lord's Supper should be celebrated and made available to the people, he replied and advised

that one or two masses should be celebrated on Sundays or on the days of the saints in the two parish churches, depending on whether there is a great or small number of communicants. If there were a need for it, or if it were considered desirable, the same could be done at the *Spital* [the Hospital]. ...during the week mass could be celebrated on whatever day there is a need for it, that is, if there are some communicants present who ask for it and desire it. In this way no one would be forced to come to the sacrament, and yet everyone would be served [with the sacrament] in an orderly and sufficient way. If the ministers complain about this, however, alleging that they are thus forced [to celebrate the Lord's Supper], or lamenting that they are unworthy [to celebrate the Lord's Supper], I would tell them that no one compels them except God himself through his call. For since they have the office, they are already obliged and compelled (on the basis of their calling and office) to administer the sacrament when it is requested of them; thus their excuses are void. This is the same as their obligation to preach, comfort, absolve, help the poor, and visit the sick, as often as these services are needed and demanded. (LW 49:206-07)

Communicants were not pressured to receive the sacrament just because it was available. Luther himself, while calling for the sacrament to be *available* every week, did not himself *commune* every week. His friend Veit Dietrich recalled in 1548 that "it was always Luther's practice that he generally went to the sacrament every 14 days or at least every 3 weeks and desired absolution beforehand..." (quoted in WA 48:326). And while Luther did usually seek out an opportunity for private confession and absolution before going to communion, he also declared in 1528: "And I, Doctor Martin Luther myself, sometimes go unconfessed, just so that I shall not myself make it a necessary habit in my conscience" (quoted in Preuss, 195).

But while Lutheran communicants were not *coerced* to commune, they were encouraged to grow in their *desire* for a more frequent reception. In view of the spiritual dangers that constantly surround Christians, Luther wrote in the Large Catechism: "If you could see how many daggers, spears, and arrows are aimed at you every moment, you would be glad to come to the sacrament as often as you can" (V:82, K/W). And those who *did* wish to commune on any given Sunday or festival were able to do so, since Holy Communion *was indeed available* on any given Sunday or festival. Or at least it was available whenever a *pastor* was available to serve as the overseer and steward of the sacrament, "which God ordained should be administered to Christians through the clerical office" – to quote Luther's 1533 treatise on "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests" (LW 38:152). The incumbents of what Luther described as "the clerical office" are described by the Epistle to the Hebrews as the church's "leaders," who "keep watch over your souls," and "who will give an account" to the Lord for the souls under their care (13:17, NASB). In this treatise Luther furthermore described "a true Christian mass according to the ordinance and institution of Christ, as well as according to the true intention of Christ and the church," as a mass in which

our pastor, bishop, or minister in the pastoral office, rightly and honorably and publicly called, ...goes before the altar. Publicly and plainly he sings what Christ has ordained and

instituted in the Lord's Supper. He takes the bread and wine, gives thanks, distributes and gives them to the rest of us who are there and want to receive them, on the strength of the words of Christ: "This is my body, this is my blood. Do this," etc. Particularly we who want to receive the sacrament kneel beside, behind, and around him... (LW 38:208)

This is what Luther was talking about in another statement from this treatise – which was incorporated into the Formula of Concord – when he said, in his capacity as a called minister of Word and Sacrament, that the Lord's Supper "is administered daily through our ministry or office" (LW 38:199; quoted in SD VII:77).

Also in his capacity as a called minister of Word and Sacrament, Luther wrote in the Large Catechism that "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" (V:2, K/W); and he wrote in the Smalcald Articles that "public, obstinate sinners should not be admitted to the sacrament or other fellowship in the church until they improve their behavior and avoid sin" (III:9, K/W). As far as the mechanics of the distribution of the Lord's Supper are concerned, Charles J. Evanson does explain that

One or more assisting ministers, chosen and instructed for this purpose, may assist in the distribution of the Sacrament by administering the blood of Christ. The presiding minister himself always administers the body of Christ, because the administration of the Lord's body indicates admission to the Sacrament. The presiding minister bears responsibility both for the celebration and for the administration of the Sacrament, and he is to exercise pastoral judgment in admitting communicants to the table. This responsibility may not be borne by vicars, field workers, or other lay persons. (Evanson, 432)

Regarding ordination, Luther and the Lutherans generally did not believe that a special charism was bestowed on a pastor through this rite. According to the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, ordination with the laying on of hands is "nothing other than" a "confirmation" of the church's call (70, K/W). But Luther did believe that ordination served as an important public attestation of the legitimacy of a new pastor's call, and as a beneficial public testimony to that new pastor's fitness for the duties of his office – including the duties of examining, instructing, absolving, and admitting communicants. In 1531 Luther wrote to John Sutel, who had been called as a preacher in the city of Göttingen, that he should not officiate at the Lord's Supper there until he had been ordained. Luther explained to Sutel that "then publicly before the altar, by the other ministers with prayer and laying on of hands, you shall receive the testimony and authority to handle the Supper" (quoted in Lieberg, 159).

For those who are called to a ministry of sacramental oversight and stewardship in the church, their role in presiding at the altar and consecrating the bread and wine, and their role in providing soul-care to communicants and supervising their participation in the sacrament, are completely intertwined. From his "First Homily on the Betrayal of Judas," St. John Chrysostom was quoted in the Formula of Concord to say, regarding the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, that

Christ prepares this table himself and blesses it; for no human being makes the bread and wine, which are set before us, the body and blood of Christ. Rather Christ himself, who was crucified for us, does that.

Chrysostom was furthermore quoted to say that it is through the very words of Jesus, "This is my body," etc., that "the elements that have been presented in the Supper are consecrated by God's power and grace"; and that "these words...are powerful and do their work in our day and until his return, so that in the Supper as celebrated in the church his true body and blood are present." And the Formula approvingly quoted Chrysostom's statement that, in this Supper as celebrated in the church, it is "by the mouth of the priest" that the powerful words of Jesus are spoken over the bread and wine (SD VII:76). On this point the Formula also quoted from Luther's 1528 "Confession con-

cerning Christ's Supper," as Luther spoke yet again in his capacity as a called minister of Word and Sacrament:

Here, too, if I were to say over all the bread there is, "This is the body of Christ," nothing would happen, but when we follow his institution and command in the Supper and say, "This is my body," then it is his body, not because of our speaking or our declarative word, but because of his command in which he has told us to speak and to do and has attached his own command and deed to our speaking. (LW 37:184; quoted in SD VII:78, K/W).

In the Lord's Supper, the objective presence of the Lord's body and blood in the bread and wine depends on the Lord's own Word and institution, and not on the personal faith of either the minister or the communicants. By means of their approving quotation from the Wittenberg Concord of 1536, the authors of the Formula of Concord accordingly confessed their belief

that the body and blood of Christ are truly distributed even to the unworthy and that the unworthy truly receive the body and blood when the sacrament is conducted according to Christ's institution and command. But they receive it to judgment, as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 11:27-32], for they misuse the holy sacrament because they receive it without true repentance and without faith. (SD VII:16, K/W)

The Augsburg Confession likewise recalls that

Paul severely threatens those who treat the Eucharist unworthily, when he says [1 Cor. 11:27]: "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord." (AC XXIV:12, K/W)

For this reason the orthodox Lutheran Church has therefore always recognized that the presiding minister has the authority to *decline* to commune those who are not properly prepared for this sacramental encounter with Christ, or who are otherwise ineligible. The Augsburg Confession approvingly observed that in his "Third Homily on Ephesians," "Chrysostom says that the priest stands daily at the altar, inviting some to Communion and keeping others away" (XXIV:36, K/W). According to the Brandenburg-Nürnberg Church Order,

Those are to be excluded from the Communion who live in willful error and heresy, or in open undeniable vice, or scorn the express Word of God. Also the irrational and fools, children who cannot understand, and those who neither know nor will learn the Ten Commandments, the Creed nor the Lord's Prayer. (Horn LWJB, 283)

Also to be excluded from orthodox Lutheran altars are those who adhere to a different confession, since "fellowship at the Lord's table is a testimony of consensus, harmony, and unity in doctrine and faith, as Paul says: 'We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor. 10:17)" (Chemnitz, 302).

With reference to the Word of God, Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, and the Keys (that is, the authority to forgive and retain sins), Luther explained in his 1539 treatise "On the Councils and the Church" that

There must be bishops, pastors, or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul states in Ephesians 4[:8], "He received gifts among men..." – his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some teachers and governors, etc. The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person..., and he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments.

Luther added, however, that

the Holy Spirit has excepted women, children, and incompetent people from this function, but chooses (except in emergencies) only competent males to fill this office, as one reads here and there in the epistles of St. Paul [I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6] that a bishop must be pious, able to teach, and the husband of one wife – and in I Corinthians 14[:34] he says, “The women should keep silence in the churches.” In summary, it must be a competent and chosen man. Children, women, and other persons are not qualified for this office, even though they are able to hear God’s Word, to receive Baptism, the Sacrament, absolution, and are also true, holy Christians, as St. Peter says [I Pet. 3:7].

With respect to Eve and Adam in particular, and women and men in general, Luther also drew attention to the fact that, in the Old Testament,

Moses says in Genesis 3[:16], “You shall be subject to man.” The Gospel, however, does not abrogate this natural law, but confirms it as the ordinance and creation of God. (LW 41:154-55)

Yet in “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests,” Luther emphasized that it is faithfulness to the external Word and institution of Christ that causes his body and blood to be present in any given observance of his Supper, and that this is not affected by the sex, character, or vocational status of the officiant. Regarding the “conversion” of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ through the speaking of Christ’s Words of Institution over them – as this would have been described and understood by the medieval church – Luther wrote: “I do not want to say, as the papists do, that neither an angel nor Mary could effect conversion, etc.” And this was because

our faith and the sacrament must not be based on the person, whether he is godly or evil, consecrated or unconsecrated, called or an impostor, whether he is the devil or his mother, but upon Christ, upon his word, upon his office, upon his command and ordinance; where these are in force, there everything will be carried out properly, no matter who or what the person might happen to be. (LW 38: 200-01)

This does not mean that Luther would have approved of an illicit and disorderly celebration of the sacrament by a woman or by an uncalled or improperly-called man. He did not stand by silently when a loud-mouthed layman simply *said* that this sort of thing would be acceptable. Martin Brecht reports that

In February 1536, Matthes Lotther, a painter of cards from Freiberg in Ducal Saxony, made unguarded statements about evangelical worship, and, among other things, claimed that laypersons could also administer the sacrament. Thereupon, Luther cautioned his fellow citizens about him. This had grave consequences for Lotther. He feared for his life and fled. Luther interceded for him with Duke Henry of Saxony, who was responsible for the government of Freiberg. Luther thought an appropriate punishment would be not exile from the land, but imprisonment for a time, combined with the requirement that he forever refrain from repeating his earlier statements. (Brecht, 37)

But it does mean that such vocational disorders, in themselves, do not cause the Word and institution of Christ to become inefficacious, or cause the body and blood of Christ not to be present. The truth of St. Augustine’s dictum, as Luther cited it in the Large Catechism, would remain: “When the Word is joined to the external element, it becomes a sacrament” (quoted in V:10, K/W). It would, however, be a sinful *dishonoring* of Christ and of his body and blood if such a thing were done – apart from any legitimate extraordinary need. A pious Christian should therefore not receive the sacrament in such a circumstance from such a person. But when a pious Christian *does* receive the sacrament from a properly-called male pastor of good reputation, his confidence that the body

and blood of Christ are truly present would not be based on these factors pertaining to the pastor. It would be based on the pastor's faithfulness in following "Christ's word and ordinance" in his celebration of the Supper.

We are reminded of what Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession states: that "no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called" (K/W). The Augsburg Confession is here telling us what *should not* be done. It is not telling us what *cannot* be done. It is indeed possible to commit the sin of administering the sacrament of our Lord's body and blood to a communicant or communicants, without any call at all; or without a *proper, orderly, and regular* call.

In the nineteenth century, the Norwegian Synod (the predecessor church of today's ELS) addressed these issues in its own way as it dealt with the pietistic Norwegian-American lay preacher Elling Eielsen (who had been ordained irregularly if at all) and with his "Ellingian" followers on the American frontier. The Norwegian Synod's focus of concern was not only on the celebration of the Lord's Supper by those who lacked a regular call, but it was on preaching and leading public worship in general without a proper call to do so. These comments, from 1867, come from Norwegian Synod President Herman Amberg Preus:

With respect to the fourteenth article of the Augsburg Confession, the Ellingians maintained that every Christian by virtue of his spiritual priesthood has the power and authority to preach publicly and does not therefore require any external call whatsoever. "It is enough that he is called by God," as it is usually said. In contradistinction to this we teach that all Christians have the right privately to admonish, teach, and pray, and indeed also in public assembly to teach, rebuke, and admonish one another. On the other hand, we believe that whenever a layman steps up in meetings organized for public edification and prays aloud, teaches, and admonishes, then he is, in fact, exercising the public office of the ministry, but according to God's Word and the fourteenth article of the Augsburg Confession he has no right to this office. Only where an actual emergency prevails is it appropriate to breach this ordinance. Where, for example, there is no pastor, or he propounds false doctrine, or where he is so miserly in serving the congregation that Christians starve for lack of food and supervision, then there is an emergency and every Christian has the right and the duty to execute the pastor's task in the public assembly. He does not do this by virtue of his spiritual priesthood, but as the congregation's temporary pastor who must breach God's ordinance in time of need. (Preus VD, 125)

For the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the Norwegian Synod, only ordained pastors were allowed to officiate, and laymen were not permitted even to assist with the distribution. First Lutheran Church in Decorah, Iowa, had been "constructed in 1876 as the temple of the Norwegian Synod" (Ferkenstad, 78). Leigh D. Jordahl writes in an essay on "Worship at First Lutheran Church" that

the communion liturgy...reached its climax when the pastor sang the Lord's Prayer and the Words of Institution. ...the communicants came up to the chancel and took their places at the rail. The bread was always placed directly on the tongue and never were there lay assistants at the rail. (quoted in Ferkenstad, 80)

Martin Chemnitz had considered it to be a great and notorious *slander* against the Lutherans, when they were accused by the Roman party of not distinguishing between called public ministers and laymen. In his defense of the Lutheran Church's adherence to standards of good order in this respect, Chemnitz also set forth a helpful summary of the theology and duties of the public ministry of Word and Sacrament, according to the Lutheran understanding, and as these duties would be carried out in the church by faithful bishops, pastors, and preachers:

They shout loudly that those who do not approve the priesthood of the papalists take away all order out of the church, that with infinite confusion they prostitute the ministry to any one

of the common people and (something which Tertullian ascribes to the heretics) make laymen out of priests and enjoin priestly functions to laymen, with the result that there is neither any authority nor dignity of the ministry, etc. Therefore this slander must first of all be removed.

Now the Anabaptists and Enthusiasts are rightly disapproved, who either take the use of the external ministry of Word and sacrament entirely out of the church, or imagine that it is useless and unnecessary. For they teach that new and special revelations should rather be sought and expected from God without the use of the external ministry of Word and sacrament, and that this kind of calling, illumination, and conversion is much more excellent and worthy of honor than if we use the voice of the ministry. And indeed, it is God by whose power, working, efficacy, impulse, and inspiration whatever pertains to calling, illumination, conversion, repentance, faith, renewal, and in short, to the business of our salvation is begun, effected, increased, and preserved in men. But God arranged by a certain counsel of His that He wills to dispense these things, not by infusing new and special revelations, illuminations, and movements into the minds of men without any means, but through the outward ministry of the Word. This ministry He did not commit to angels, so that their appearances are to be sought and expected, but He put the Word of reconciliation into men, and He wills that the proclamation of the Gospel, divinely revealed, should sound forth through them.

All Christians are indeed priests (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6), because they offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Everyone also can and should teach the Word of God in his own house (Deut. 6:7; 1 Cor. 14:35). Nevertheless, not everyone ought to take and arrogate to himself the public ministry of Word and sacrament. For not all are apostles; not all are teachers (1 Cor. 12:29), but those who have been set apart for this ministry by God through a particular and legitimate call (Acts 13:2; Jer. 23:21; Rom. 10:15). This is done either immediately or mediately. Paul prescribes a legitimate manner of calling which is made through the voice of the church (1 Tim. 3:2-7; and Titus 1:5-9). Christ Himself indeed called certain men to this ministry immediately, in order to show that He approves the ministry of those who are chosen and called by the voice of the church according to the rule prescribed by the apostles... There is added also the promise that God will truly work effectively through the ministry of those who teach the Gospel, which the Son of God wills to preserve in the church through perpetual calling, as Paul says in Eph. 4:8 ff.: He ascended; He gave gifts to men; and He gave some to be apostles, some prophets, others evangelists, others however pastors and teachers for perfecting of the saints in the work of ministry, in edification of the body of Christ. To this use of the ministry, which God both instituted and preserves in the church, men must therefore be guided, and taught that through this ministry there are offered to us eternal blessings, and indeed that God in this way receives us, rescues us from sin and the power of the devil and from eternal death, and restores to us righteousness and eternal life.

This ministry does indeed have power, divinely bestowed (2 Cor. 10:4-6; 13:2-4), but circumscribed with certain duties and limitations, namely, to preach the Word of God, teach the erring, reprove those who sin, admonish the dilatory, comfort the troubled, strengthen the weak, resist those who speak against the truth, reproach and condemn false teaching, censure evil customs, dispense the divinely instituted sacraments, remit and retain sins, be an example to the flock, pray for the church privately and lead the church in public prayers, be in charge of care for the poor, publicly excommunicate the stubborn and again receive those who repent and reconcile them with the church, appoint pastors to the church according to the instruction of Paul, with consent of the church institute rites that serve the ministry and do not militate against the Word of God nor burden consciences but serve good order, dignity, decorum, tranquillity, edification, etc. (Chemnitz, 677-79)

In the seventeenth century the Danish Lutheran theologian Jesper Rasmussen Brochmand taught in his *Systematis Universae Theologiae* that "The only administrators of the Holy Communion are the ministers of the Word, who have been legitimately called, ...like Aaron, Heb. 5:4; also because those alone should administer this Sacrament who are able to examine the faith of the

men using this Sacrament” (quoted in LCSA, 55). Even if a pastor does not require all communicants to speak with him each time they intend to commune, for an examination of their faith, he does reserve the right to ask a guest or a parishioner to speak with him beforehand on any occasion when he judges that this is necessary. Pastoral aptitude is required not only within such a private conversation, but also for determining whether such a conversation needs to take place.

In the early twentieth century, the Wisconsin Synod’s Adolf Hoenecke taught in his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* that “The administration of the Lord’s Supper is the responsibility of none but the ordained servants of the church,” for the following reasons:

[1.] 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. [2.] According to Scripture, there is no such emergency case in regard to the Lord’s Supper as there is in regard to Baptism. Our dogmaticians, 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.

Hoenecke added that “More on this point is to be found in discussions of casuistry,” and he acknowledged that “There are also differing views among the Lutheran dogmaticians” (Hoenecke, IV:140-41). In our own century, John F. Brug, also of the Wisconsin Synod, writes that “Anyone who accepts the present WELS statements on church and ministry won’t find anything in Hoenecke (or for that matter in [C. F. W.] Walther) that contradicts those statements or even anything that makes them very uncomfortable” (Brug R, 316). And Brug in his own right explains that

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. (Brug MW, 221)

Are there ever exceptions to this rule? We know that there are such exceptions with respect to Baptism and Absolution, such as when an unbaptized person is in mortal danger or when a dying person craves the comfort of knowing that his sins are forgiven. The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope clearly teaches that

in an emergency even a layperson grants absolution and becomes the minister or pastor of another. So Augustine tells the story of two Christians in a boat, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen) and then the latter, having been baptized, absolved the former. (67, K/W).

But as the Missouri Synod’s C. F. W. Walther notes,

Starting with Luther, the vast majority of our theologians maintain that the Holy Supper should never be administered privately by a person not holding the public preaching office or by a so-called layman – partly because, unlike with Baptism or Absolution, there cannot be an emergency regarding Holy Communion which would justify straying from God’s order (1 Cor. 4:1; Rom. 10:15; Heb. 5:4); partly because the Holy Supper “is a manifest confession and should thus have manifest ministers”; partly because divisions can easily be caused by such private [acts of] Communion.

Walther personally agreed with this majority opinion, but he knew that there was also a minority opinion, since “a whole series of strictly orthodox Lutheran theologians, all above suspicion, have

taught that the Holy Supper could even be validly administered...by a layman in a (presumed) case of necessity” (Walther ALPT, 206-07).

Based on what was said by the theologians of the past who held to this minority viewpoint, John H. C. Fritz suggests that “Such an exceptional case might arise when an orthodox pastor cannot be called, as when a Christian is at the point of death, at high sea, or when he has been taken captive by barbarians, and the like.” He adds that “Even under such exceptional circumstances, however, we would advise a Christian not to insist that the Sacrament be administered to him contrary to the regular established order” (Fritz, 126). Brug expresses a similar opinion when he points out that

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.

Brug does, however, envision the possibility of *abnormal* circumstances in which a layman might be *called* to serve as a “temporary pastor,” and to administer the Lord’s Supper to a gathering of Christians. But according to Brug, the kind of “exceptional cases” in which such a thing might be contemplated would be “Cases of war and extreme isolation” and similar times of extraordinary need (Brug MW, 118-19). A pastor being away on vacation for a couple weeks, or a congregation being vacant but able to be served periodically by a pastor from a neighboring community, are not the kind of “exceptional cases” that would justify a suspension of the normal order of vocation.

Fritz also raises the question of whether a call to administer the Lord’s Supper might under certain circumstances be issued to someone who would otherwise not be seen as qualified for a *regular* call to carry out such a duty. Referring both to ordinary laymen and to seminary students, he asks:

May an entire congregation under exceptional circumstances *call* a layman (or a student of theology) to administer to them the Sacrament? We need not hesitate to answer this question affirmatively; for under such circumstances the layman, by virtue of his having been called to do so by the entire congregation, *acts* as the congregation’s representative, even as a regularly called minister would do. In due respect, however, to God’s own established order of the ministry and His precise mention of the necessary qualifications a layman should not be called to administer the Sacrament unless *very exceptional* circumstances justify it. (Fritz, 126)

Again, a pastor being away on vacation for a couple weeks, or a congregation being vacant but able to be served periodically by a pastor from a neighboring community, are not the kind of “exceptional circumstances” that would justify a suspension of the normal order of vocation.

The Wisconsin Synod’s Irwin J. Habeck endorses the practice of “having a theological student assist with the distribution of the Lord’s Supper,” and he concedes that “in an emergency” such a student might even be allowed to “function alone” as a celebrant. His qualification that this might be done *in an emergency* demonstrates that he would be opposed to such a practice becoming a normal feature of seminary training, since he also says that “what is done in an emergency, as a case of casuistry, dare not become the basis for a general practice” (Habeck, 197, 205).

In his book on *The Church & the Office of the Ministry*, Walther had quoted, with approval, a statement from Johann Conrad Dannhauer's *Liber conscientiae apertus* that one of the benefits of ordination was

that the examined and unexamined teachers of the church can be distinguished, so that a certain Besold may not rightfully complain that "the Lutherans often use as vicars certain scholars who are not yet ordained with the laying on of hands, permitting them to hear confession, feed the sick, and administer their [Lord's] Supper." (quoted in Walther COM, 260)

Christoph Besold, a Roman Catholic convert from Lutheranism, may indeed have been aware of occasions when the kind of laxity that he described had been allowed or tolerated among certain Lutherans. But if such disorders had occurred, Dannhauer clearly wanted them to come to an end, and not to be repeated. Walther misunderstood a statement in Hieronymus Kromayer's *Theologia positiva-polemica* that he thought contradicted the position of Dannhauer, so that he wrote in a footnote to the Dannhauer quote:

But here we cannot deny what Kromayer writes: "Students of theology in certain places, as in the congregations at Wittenberg [Württemberg?], sometimes also here in Swabia, administer the Sacraments." (Walther COM 260)

This misunderstanding was, however, later corrected by Walther's younger friend and colleague E. W. Kaehler, who demonstrated – on the basis of a statement in the *Wittenberg Judgments* – that Kromayer was actually describing the custom of "many Württemberg, Schwabish, Alsatian, and other highland churches of the Augsburg Confession," according to which "such *actiones sacrae* (preaching, administering the sacraments, comforting the sick, burying) are committed to ordained students of theology who do not yet have a parish or place of their own, as helpers of the regular clergy" (Kaehler, 45).

Walther differentiated, however, between the disorder of unordained theological students presiding at the altar, and the useful exercise of unordained theological students preaching from the pulpit. In this he was following the example of David Hollaz, who had written that

There is a distinction between preaching exercises and the regular office of preaching. The sermons of students are exercises in which they modestly offer to the Church services that are hereafter to be rendered, but do not claim for themselves the regular office of preaching. (quoted in Jacobs, 430)

Lutherans have always been more flexible in allowing non-ordained theological students or lay readers to preach or proclaim the Word of God, especially when a pastor is not available, due to their conviction – as expressed in the German version of the Apology – that "of all acts of worship, that is the greatest, most holy, most necessary, and highest, which God has required as the highest in the First and Second Commandment, namely to preach the Word of God" (XV:42, CT). Luther also wrote in "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests" that "the word of God is the greatest, most necessary and most sublime part in Christendom (for the sacraments cannot exist without the word, but indeed the word can exist without the sacraments, and in an emergency one could be saved without the sacraments – as for example, those who die before receiving the desired baptism – but not without the word)..." (LW 38:189). This is why Walther explained in a letter to Norwegian Synod Pastor Jakob Aall Ottesen, "Regarding students and candidates who also occasionally preach," that

these men preach in order to maintain the order of the preaching office, not to overturn it. Their sermons are exercises, preparations, and examinations so that in the future, they may be placed into and established in the preaching office. They do this therefore not as laymen, but as Tertullian says, as "episcopi aut presbyteri aut diaconi discentes" (bishops or elders or deacons in the process of learning)... To that end it happens that their sermons

are thoroughly evaluated. They subject themselves thereby at the same time to the election of the Church. (AHHF, 139-40)

Most properly, a theological student's sermons are "thoroughly evaluated" not only *as* or *after* they are preached, but also *before* they are preached. The professor or pastor who reviews the manuscript of such a sermon, and who makes any necessary corrections or improvements in it before the student is allowed to deliver it, thereby validates the soundness of the sermon as an extension of his own teaching and preaching office. The student in such a case does not validate the soundness of his own sermon.

Walther served for many years as president of Concordia Seminary in Saint Louis. In that capacity he did allow men who might be described in a certain sense as "bishops or elders or deacons in the process of learning" to deliver approved sermons. But we also know that he did *not* allow those same men to administer the Lord's Supper until they were *actual* "bishops or elders or deacons" who had *completed* the process of learning. Through this "process of learning" those who are to serve in the church's preaching office (*Predigtamt*), as spiritual overseers of God's people in various settings, are carefully trained and tested. For Lutherans this is very important. Erling T. Teigen explains that

the *Predigtamt*...is the office which exercises the keys on the public behalf, which administers word and sacrament in the place of Christ. One is called to this *Amt* (Rom 10:15), mediately by the royal priesthood, but is set in the office by God (Acts 20:28) and has the specific appointment by Christ (Jn 20:21) along with the promise of Christ, "He who hears you hears Me" (Lk 10:16). The incumbents of this office hold an apostolic ministry and are "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1). There are specific qualifications for the office, e.g. 1 Tim 2:12, 3:1-7, 1 Cor 14:34; the office holders are to have their livelihood by that work (1 Tim 5:17) and they are to be seminary graduates, i.e. not in form, but in substance, properly trained (2 Tim 2:2, 1 Tim 3:8-17, Ti 1:9).

Teigen also explains that "the pastor in a local congregation," together with "A missionary, a seminary professor, a college or hospital chaplain," all "certainly have the *Predigtamt*" (Teigen, 13-14).

Similar to the practice of allowing a theological student to deliver an approved sermon is the occasional use of a "lay reader," who in the absence of a pastor is authorized to deliver a sermon written by a pastor while also conducting a "Service of the Word" (without Communion) for a Lutheran congregation. The use of lay readers was more common than it is today, in the frontier conditions within which many Lutheran congregations struggled to survive and function in earlier periods of American history. Times of persecution – such as occurred in the Hapsburg domains in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in the Soviet Union in the twentieth century – have also been occasions when lay readers filled a necessary role in the very survival of the Lutheran Church.

Again, according to the normal order of vocation, only fully trained and properly ordained pastors are to be authorized to officiate at the Sacrament of the Altar. And returning to the question of possible exceptions to this normal order, we should not forget that most orthodox Lutherans, through most of Lutheran history, have followed the lead of the older Luther in this matter. Most Lutherans of the past were *not* willing to make the kind of exceptions for the administration of the Lord's Supper in *presumed* emergency situations that they *were* willing to make for the administration of Holy Baptism in *certain and definite* emergency situations. In his 1520 treatise "To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation," Luther had discussed a scenario wherein he would allow for a layman to become an emergency pastor and to perform all the duties of the pastoral office – including the duty of saying mass (that is, administering the Lord's Supper):

...suppose a group of earnest Christian laymen were taken prisoner and set down in a desert without an episcopally ordained priest among them. And suppose they were to come

to a common mind there and then in the desert and elect one of their number, whether he were married or not, and charge him to baptize, say mass, pronounce absolution, and preach the Gospel. Such a man would be as truly a priest as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes in the world. That is why in cases of necessity anyone can baptize and give absolution. (LW 44:128)

But by 1523, when he penned his treatise “Concerning the Ministry,” Luther had backed away from this. In the 1523 writing he discussed the “atrocious and cruel conditions” under which some Bohemian Hussites were then living, which he compared to the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews. The Bohemians’ circumstances did not allow them to have a properly-ordered church life or a properly-ordered public ministry. Luther advised them that it would be safe and wholesome

for the father of the household to read the gospel and, since the universal custom and use allows it to the laity, to baptize those who are born in his home, and so to govern himself and his according to the doctrine of Christ, even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is not so necessary that salvation depends on it. The gospel and baptism are sufficient, since faith alone justifies and love alone lives rightly.

When Luther went on to discuss a possible network of several or many households, beyond a single family – which ostensibly could join together in forming a congregation or congregations with the right and power of ecclesiastical vocation – he still did not allow them to arrange for the Lord’s Supper to be administered among themselves without a regularly-ordained pastor to do it. He wrote that

if in this way two, three, or ten homes, or a whole city, or several cities agreed thus among themselves to live in faith and love by the use of the gospel in the home, and even if no ordained man...ever came to them or in any other way was placed over them as minister to administer the Eucharist and other sacraments, Christ without a doubt would be in their midst and would own them as his church. ... For He himself said “One thing only is necessary” [Luke 10:42], the Word of God, in which man has his life. For if he lives in the Word and has the Word, he is able to forego all else...

Luther then returned to his earlier thought, restating that

The father in the home...can provide his own with the necessities through the Word and in pious humility do without the nonessentials as long as he is in captivity. In this regard we follow the custom and law of the Jewish captives who were not able to be in Jerusalem or to make offering there. Upheld in their faith alone by the Word of God they passed their lives among enemies while yearning for Jerusalem. So in this case the head of the household suffering under the tyranny of the pope would act most appropriately and safely if while longing for the Eucharist, which he neither would dare nor could receive, in the meantime zealously and faithfully propagated faith in his home through the Word of God until God on high in his mercy either brought the captivity to an end or sent a true minister of the Word. (LW 40:9-10)

And later, in a 1536 letter to Wolfgang Brauer, Luther reasserted the same viewpoint when he wrote that the housefather of a family that is not able to receive the Lord’s Supper from an orthodox pastor

is not in duty bound to go ahead in this matter and commune himself and his household. Nor is this necessary, since he has neither call nor command to do so. ... It would also give great offense to administer the Sacrament here and there in the homes, and in the end no good would come of it, for there will be factions and sects... But if a father wishes to teach the Word of God to his family, that is right and should be done, for it is God’s mandate that

we should teach and bring up our children and household; that is commanded to everyone. But the Sacrament is a public confession and should have public ministers, because, as Christ says, we should do it in remembrance of Him; that is, as St. Paul explains it, we should show forth or preach the Lord's death till He comes [cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26]. And here [Paul] also says that we should come together, and he severely rebukes those who, each in his own way, use the Lord's Supper individually. On the other hand, it is not forbidden but rather commanded that everyone individually should instruct his household in God's Word, as well as himself... For there is a great difference between a public office in the church and [the office of] a father in his household. Hence the two must neither be mingled into each other nor be separated from each other. Since there is neither an emergency nor a call here, we must do nothing out of our own devotion without God's definite mandate, for no good will come from it. (quoted in Walther COM, 163-64)

The office of housefather is a domestic office, not an ecclesiastical office. In itself it therefore does not include the duty of administering the sacraments, since the sacraments are ecclesiastical institutions and not domestic institutions.

The Large Catechism notes that through the sacrament of Baptism "we are initially received into the Christian community" (IV:2, K/W). Even when it is administered in a private setting, Baptism always has the whole church in view, since the Holy Spirit, through this sacrament, unites the person being baptized to the "one body" of Christ: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13, ESV). The Lord's Supper, too – in the words of the Smalcald Articles – is "the common sacrament of the church," which is not to be played with "apart from God's Word and outside the church community" (II, II:9, K/W). And this is why we confess in the Large Catechism that "the whole gospel and the article of the Creed, 'I believe in one holy Christian church...the forgiveness of sins,' are embodied in this sacrament and offered to us through the Word" (V:32, K/W) – that is, through the instituting and consecrating Word of Christ. The Lord's Supper is therefore also a sacrament of and for the "one body" of Christ: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17, ESV).

For these reasons, according to God's regular order, the sacraments of the church of God are to be administered by those pastors, presbyters, or bishops who have been trained and called to "take care of the church of God" (1 Timothy 3:5, NASB). And St. Paul's statement to Titus that a presbyter or bishop in the church is "God's steward" (1:7, ESV) hearkens back to what he had previously said in his First Epistle to the Corinthians concerning the "stewards of the mysteries of God," with the added thought there that "it is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (4:1-2, ESV).

When a housefather administers a baptism in an emergency situation, he does this, not as a housefather *per se*, but as an emergency pastor. But Luther also would not have considered it to be in keeping with God's order of vocation for the members of a household, in effect, to constitute themselves as an informal "congregation" and to issue an informal "call" to their head and father to become their "pastor," for the purpose of communing them. As Luther saw it, there was no emergency need for the Lord's Supper in such a situation, and therefore such a "call" would not be a proper and legitimate call.

We can summarize and conclude all of this with these words of Kaehler:

If we do not wish to deny...that the administration of the holy supper by a non-ordained layman called only for a time by an entire congregation in an emergency is effective and legitimate, still we must determinedly stress that only the most difficult of emergencies would permit this. If a congregation in ordinary circumstances calls an unordained person, she despises ecclesiastical order. The call to the office of the word must have some public witness on account of those who run and are not sent (Jer 23:21), and ordination gives this

witness. If this is the case – and no Lutheran will deny it – then it is also correct when we claim: He who should administer an essential part of the holy ministry should be ordained.

If circumstances arise in which it is impossible to hold to the order of ordination, then we must at least demand some type of setting apart of the person called to the holy office, for Acts 13:2 says: “When they had served the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit spoke: ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (see Rom 1:1). (Kaehler, 44-45)

This essay is adapted from material that appears in the author’s longer essay, “The Divine Service in Confessional Lutheranism and in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” available online at tinyurl.com/DivineService

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Divine Service in Wittenberg, 1530



The last ordination service at which Martin Luther officiated, at St. Andrew's Church in Eisleben in 1546

