

The Celebration of Holy Communion During Pandemic

An Appreciation of LCMS Doctrine and Practice

During this time of COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing, and the closure of churches and corporate worship services, we have entered into what some refer to as a “eucharistic fast.” We cannot come before the altar to receive the Sacrament of the Altar; we cannot corporately gather to give thanks in the Eucharist meal; we yearn to receive Holy Communion and with it, the real and very Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Some have ventured into the realm of “virtual” communion; that is, celebrating communion in our homes, but online with one another. Still others have spoken of celebrating communion in individual homes. This discussion has divided the church-at-large and challenged it to determine what is the “best practice” moving forward. While we have thought and prayed and discussed and considered the various challenges and opportunities that have presented themselves to pastors and their congregations, I think it a needful thing to remember what we confess as The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

First of all, we have been here before (in a manner of speaking). While the infant Synod was developing from the Saxon immigration to Missouri, there was controversy regarding the Office of the [Pastoral] Ministry and the Church. Due to the moral and financial failures of the groups “bishop,” Martin Stephan, chaos erupted when he was deposed and rowed across the Mississippi River into Illinois. The “question” arose: “‘Are we a church?’ Pastors doubted the validity of their calls. Factions began to be formed between the pastors who wanted to maintain a hierarchical form of government and a well-educated anti-clerical faction who were demanding a voice in the affairs of the community.”¹ The young pastor-leader, C. F. W. Walther, would have to address the situation, debating with a lawyer by the name of Adolph Marbach; what has become known as the “Altenburg Debate.” Walther’s argument at Altenburg was to encourage the Saxon immigrants not to give in to unfounded fears about being a church.² “He consoled their hearts, convincing them that they were Christians despite any error in their midst; that the Church was to be found in their company; that they were a part of the *Una Sanctum Ecclesia* (Universal Church); and that as possessors of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, they had the power and authority to call pastors to proclaim the Gospel and administer the Sacraments.”³

Parallel to the Missouri experience was the development of the Buffalo Synod, made up of another groups of Saxons and Silesians under the leadership of Johannes Andreas August Grabau. While most of this immigration settled in upper state New York (hence, the “Buffalo Synod”), there was a contingent that moved on to Wisconsin. When a pastor was not available, the congregation used the services of a male schoolteacher to preach and administer the

¹ Todd Peperkorn, *The Use of C. F. W. Walther's "Kirche und Amt" in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to 1947*, a Thesis paper, p. 24.

² For a more thorough, historical discussion, you can read “Of Church and Ministry and the LCMS,” available on the Congregations Matter web site.

³ *Ibid*, p. 2.

sacrament in their services. Grabau vehemently disapproved and sent a letter to Walther and G. H. Loeber asking for their support. Due to the Altenburg Debate and subsequent fallout, they did not reply until two years later and disagreed with his conclusions. A couple of pertinent points in this conflict:

- Grabau believed that the efficacy of the sacraments depended on the validity of the (pastor) ministry; Walther saw that the administration of the sacraments depended solely on the Word of God.
- Grabau (and Wilhelm Loehe, who got caught up in the argument) saw that the Office of the Keys was entirely invested in the pastoral ministry and not the congregation. Walther taught and maintained that the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven were given to the entire Christian Church via the priesthood of all believers; which Keys were *conferred* on the called pastor to exercise on behalf of the congregation.

This ongoing controversy pre-dated the formation of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1847, when a congregational autonomy was adopted (to the chagrin of Grabau and Loehe). Key to the understanding of congregational autonomy is understanding the nature of the church, as delineated by Walther in his Theses on the Church, Thesis IV:

The true Church of believers and saints it is to which Christ has given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore this Church is the real and sole holder and bearer of the spiritual, divine, and heavenly blessings, rights, powers, offices, etc., which Christ has gained and which are available in His Church.⁴

For Walther and the Missouri pastors, the Synod would be formed as a synodical union based upon a congregational autonomy.⁵ Likewise, Benjamin Mayes⁶ notes that “[t]he Missouri Saxons, for their part, likewise emphasized the necessity of the call before anyone is permitted to carry out ministerial functions, though they argue strongly for the legitimacy of a call from laypeople without any pastors participating in the call process.”

Writing on congregational governance, Walther makes an important note that represents of his view on the congregational autonomy of the Synod:

Note 2. The fact that the keys were given to the whole church originally and immediately, that is to say, not mediately through an ordained ministry, and this

⁴ *Moving Frontier*, edited by Carl S. Meyer, © 1964 by Concordia Publishing House, p. 164.

⁵ In his Thesis to the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, for the degree of Master of Sacred Theology, William J. Schmelder notes: “This thesis is of particular importance since here Walther is laying down the principle of congregational rights. He demonstrates conclusively from numerous quotations from the Scriptures that the power of the church rests with the congregation,” p. 85.

⁶ Benjamin T. Mayes, “Grabau versus Walther: The Use of the *Book of Concord* in the American Lutheran Debate on Church and Ministry in the Nineteenth Century,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 75:3-4, July/October 2011, p. 227.

in such a way that they belong in equal measure to every congregation, the smallest as well as the largest, is attested first of all by the public confessions of our church is unmistakable.⁷

Hence, one of the two, official, Doctrinal Statement of the LCMS includes three statements germane to our discussion:

OF THE CHURCH

30. The Original and True Possessors of All Christian Rights and Privileges – Since the Christians are the Church, it is self-evident that they alone originally possess the spiritual gifts and rights which Christ has gained for, and given to, His Church. Thus St. Paul reminds all believers: “All things are yours,” and Christ Himself commits to all believers the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and commissions all believers to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. Accordingly, we reject all doctrines by which this spiritual power or any part thereof is adjudged as originally invested in certain individuals or bodies, such as the Pope, or the bishops, or the order of the ministry, or the secular lords, or councils, or synods, etc. The officers of the Church publicly administer their offices only by virtue of delegated powers, and such administration remains under the supervision of the latter. Naturally all Christians have also the right and the duty to judge and decide matters of doctrine, not according to their own notions, of course, but according to the Word of God.

OF THE PUBLIC MINISTRY

31. By the public ministry we mean the office by which the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are administered by order and in the name of a Christian congregation. Concerning this office we teach that it is a divine ordinance; that is, the Christians of a certain locality must apply the means of grace not only privately and within the circle of their families nor merely in their common intercourse with fellow Christians, but they are required, by the divine order, to make provision that the Word of God be publicly preached in their midst, and the Sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, by persons qualified for such work, whose qualifications and official functions are exactly defined in Scripture.

Although the office of the ministry is a divine ordinance, it possesses no other power than the power of the Word of God; that is to say, it is the duty of Christians

⁷ C. F. W. Walther, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, translated by John Theodore Mueller, © 1963 by Concordia Publishing House, p. 14.

to yield unconditional obedience to the office of the ministry whenever, and as long as, the minister proclaims to them the Word of God. If, however, the minister, in his teachings and injunctions, were to go beyond the Word of God, it would be the duty of Christians not to obey, but to disobey him, so as to remain faithful to Christ. Accordingly, we reject the false doctrine ascribing to the office of the ministry the right to demand obedience and submission in matters which Christ has not commanded.⁸

The other official, Doctrinal Statement of the LCMS states, concerning the "Holy Preaching Office [*Predigtamt*] or Pastoral Office [*Pfarramt*]:

Thesis I

The holy preaching office or parish pastoral office is an office distinct from the office of priest, which all believers have.

Thesis II

The preaching office or the parish pastoral office is not a human institution but an office God Himself has established.

Thesis III

The preaching office is not an optional office but one whose establishment has been commanded to the church to which the church is ordinarily bound till the end of time.

Thesis V

The preaching office has the authority to preach the Gospel and administer the holy sacraments as well as the authority of spiritual judgment.

Thesis VII

The preaching office is the authority, conferred by God through the congregation as the possessor of the priesthood and all church authority, to exercise the rights of the spiritual priesthood in public office in behalf of the congregation.⁹

BRINGING THIS HOME

As to the question regarding "Holy Communion During Pandemic," the question has been raised regarding the celebration of the communion meal in "extreme emergency"

⁸ *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, adopted by The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1932.

⁹ Taken from Walther's *Church and Ministry (Die Stimmer unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt)* as translated from *Moving Frontiers*, op. cit.

Southeastern District LCMS Resource

Written by Rev. Dr. Mike Ramey, Intentional Interim Pastor, Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church in Ashburn VA

conditions. Hence, a variety of practices have been used, such as: "Eucharist Fast," "Drive-By Distribution," "Virtual Communion," and "Zoom Consecration." Further questions are posed regarding the celebration of the sacrament in the gathering of a "house church."

From our unique heritage of faith perspective and in view of our ordination vows as pastors of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, I would suggest that careful consideration of the following questions should proceed any decisions regarding the celebration of Holy Communion:

- **What is our understanding of the administration of the sacraments?** While the "keys" are the possession of the congregation as they represent the priesthood of all believers in the local place, the "keys" and Word and Sacrament are specifically conferred upon the called pastor of the congregation. Will a "new" practice, even in time of pandemic, unnecessarily confuse the congregation...the neighboring congregation...the church-at-large?
- **At what point may an "exception," even in time of "extreme emergency," establish a new precedent for a "new normal"?** Pundits are already predicting that the church-at-large will see a significant shift from "in-person" worship to "virtual worship" in the coming months as people have become comfortable worship at home. If a "virtual communion" is practiced in a time of "extreme emergency," what will keep the same practice from becoming acceptable for all time? Would this diminish the "communion" aspect ("common-in-oneness") of the corporate gathering and could it possibly lead to a new interpretation of what Holy Communion is all about?
- **Moving forward with the consideration of a "house church," how will numerous, small group, "sacramental" gatherings impact the traditional, corporate gathering of God's people?** Based on our heritage, how do we "pastor" these "house churches" without bringing affront or causing chaos among the church-at-large? How do we respect both our faith and practice in a "new normal"?

I am hopeful that this brief study helps guide and inform our future discussions and the decisions that we make as we make our way through the current pandemic and beyond.

Faithfully submitted,

Rev. Dr. Mike Ramey

Intentional Interim Pastor

Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church in Ashburn VA