

Properly Called: The Role of the “Laity” in the Public Administration of the Gospel

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Words matter. I firmly believe this. Every year, I torment my catechism class with lots of terms. Sometimes I try to soften the blow by calling them BSTW’s: Big Scary Theological Words. But I still make them learn what justification and sanctification and many other words mean. I talk to them about the word pictures behind conversion and regeneration and illumination. Words matter.

But then I entitle my convention essay “Properly Called: The Role of the ‘Laity’ in the Public Administration of the Gospel” and I have to put the word *laity* in quotation marks because, as we shall see, there’s no such thing as a lay person in the public administration of the gospel. It’s a little like saying “the role of an unemployed person in the workforce.” It’s a contradiction in terms. But it’s hard to express the concept that I want to talk about in quick and easy language. Sometimes words fail us.

The point is the proper place of the members of our congregations in speaking, preaching and teaching the word of God on behalf of the congregation as a whole. Is there a role for our members to play? What does it mean for the doctrine of the divine call? What kind of precedent does it set and how will it be viewed and understood by our members when we ask members to take a public place in our preaching and teaching of God’s Word? We can’t possibly say all there is to say about this subject, but I hope to do at least two things this afternoon. First, I want to establish what role, if any, members have in the public administration of the gospel and how that relates to God’s call into the ministry. Second, I want to look at a few practical ways we have done and might do that, focusing especially on some questions about communion practice that have come up in our district.

The Public Ministry – A Call From God

The majority of confessional Lutherans have always taught that God established the Holy Ministry.¹ The Augsburg Confession states:

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ’s merit, when we so believe. (Article V – Kolb, Wengert translation).

¹ There was a fairly serious dispute about this in 19th century on both sides of the Atlantic, but the WELS and most Synodical Conference theologians insisted that God did, in fact, establish the public ministry, even though they did later disagree about some aspects of what that meant. See John Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, pp. 251-280 for a good overview.

Generally speaking, in the WELS we understand this statement to refer not to the public ministry, but to preaching the gospel in every way that it is done. Article XIV of the AC is the actual discussion of public ministry. When the Apology of the Augsburg Confession discusses the number of sacraments, it makes the statement, “For the ministry of the Word has the command of God and has magnificent promises” (Article XIII, Kolb-Wengert).

But it is rather difficult to find one single passage of Scripture or one moment in Bible history when God actually instituted the public ministry. The discussion of *when* God did that is worthy of a paper all by itself and has been discussed at length in some of the works noted in the bibliography. What we will focus on today is the practical reality that the Scriptures speak of the public ministry as God’s institution.² In Romans 10:15, St. Paul asks, “And how can they preach unless they are sent (ἀποσταλῶσιν – *apostaloosin*)?” Of course, the one sending is God and the ones who need to be sent – to be called – are the preachers.

In Acts 20, St. Paul gathers “the elders of the church” (τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας – *tous presbyterous tes ekklesias*) in Ephesus (v. 17). These men were not the members of the board of elders, as we often conceive of it in the 21st century WELS. They were the ministers of that congregation. Paul gives them the charge: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (v. 28). Keeping watch over the church/serving as shepherds is clearly a public ministry function. Note how Paul says they got that job: the Holy Spirit made them overseers (ἐπισκόπους – *episkopous*).

That oversight lies at the heart of the public ministry. In its widest and most complete form, the public minister shepherds – he cares for and watches over – the flock, even while he carefully watches his own life and faith. Of course, the tools he uses to do that are the law and the gospel. But there is an inherent authority when he acts on behalf of the church, as Hebrews 13:17 reminds us: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you (ὑπὲρ τῶν ψυχῶν ὑμῶν – *hyper toon psychoon hymoon*, literally “over your souls”) as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Now, that does not mean that every form of public ministry exercises that authority in the same way. We usually think of the pastor as exercising the fullest oversight over the congregation. A Lutheran elementary school teacher doesn’t hold the same authority over the congregation at large. A lector in a worship service only exercises authority in the sense that he speaks the Word of God while the rest of us listen. So, it is possible to limit the scope of the authority in the call, even to the point where it’s a very minor part of the public work of a specific office.

While we could talk about a number of other passages, let’s be content with the most common (and to some degree most disputed) of the passages, Ephesians 4:11-13:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

² Ironically, the word “institution” is not really a part of the biblical vocabulary for God giving the ministry. See Brug pp. 69ff.

St. Paul clearly states that Christ (“he”) gave (ἔδωκεν – *edoken*) some to serve in all these public ministry roles (see also 1 Corinthians 12:28). For our purposes today, it’s enough to see that God calls individuals to those offices. The very generic way that Paul says this points to the fact that it is God’s will that the public ministry exist among us, wherever a congregation gathers.

Going back to those Ephesian elders in Acts 20, it is significant that Paul says that the Holy Spirit “made them” (ἔθετο – *etheto* “set” or “appointed”) overseers because we have no indication that they were immediately called to that position the way Paul was on the road to Damascus. They were most likely chosen either by Paul or by an election within the congregation.³ Yet, however it happened, they were called by God. God worked through the church to designate the men who would serve in the public ministry.

The Bible gives us glimpses of how this was done in the early church. We have Paul’s instructions to Timothy and Titus to appoint ministers (2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:5). We have the casting of lots (or perhaps ballots) to replace Judas in Jerusalem in Acts 1:23-26. But we don’t have nearly enough information to draw general conclusions about the way ministers were chosen in the apostolic church. But one thing we can say: Christ calls through the church. It is a “divine call.”

Once again, words matter. Every year, I ask my catechism class what “divine” means. You know what they say? “Really, really nice,” like when a little old lady says, “Oh, that’s simply divine!” But that’s not what the word means. It means “having to do with God.” A divine call comes from God and if a call is real it is divine. So we Lutherans confess: “Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call” (AC XIV, Kolb-Wengert).

What do we mean by that statement? First of all, we are talking about public ministry, not private teaching, like a father sharing the Word with his children, or like one Christian explaining to another what the pastor meant in his sermon or sharing the gospel with someone who doesn’t believe. Private ministry can even be done publicly. In 1985, when I was in the army, I flew back from Germany for my grandfather’s funeral. We had a very bumpy ride and the lady next to me was getting very nervous. She asked me about the book I was reading, E.G. Schwiebert’s *Luther and his Times*. It led to a lengthy discussion of the gospel. After an hour or so, the man behind us joined our conversation because he had been listening. Even though we were in a public place and people heard us, I was not engaging in public ministry at that time. In the same way, when I confirm my eighth graders every May, they stand up in front of the congregation and confess their faith. But they have not crossed the line that the Augustana draws here, because they are confessing for themselves so that the congregation knows and welcomes them to communion and to a broader participation in the priesthood of all believers.

Public ministry is ministry done on behalf of the church. When the AC was written, the primary purpose of Article XIV was to assure the emperor that the Lutheran churches were following a carefully regulated, legitimate process with a call issued by the church, rather than letting some “enthusiast” claim to have an inner call and seize the pulpit in their churches. So in Luther and Melancthon’s writings “publicly” doesn’t usually mean “on behalf of the church” but rather “in the public square” (see Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry” pp.

³ Acts 14:23 indicates that was what Paul did earlier, on his first missionary journey, but interestingly, not until he passed through on his way *back home*. Did natural leaders arise during that time? Did they even have the endorsement of the local congregation before Paul appointed them?

35-36, footnote 27). However, as the debate in Lutheranism evolved, the emphasis shifted more and more to the point that public ministry is people called by God to speak for the church.

Sometimes in the WELS we use the term “representative ministry.” We mean that guys like me aren’t speaking for ourselves. But the point actually is *not* that we’re speaking for Christ. We are, of course, speaking for Christ. Jesus says, “He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). When I was installed, I vowed to preach the *Word of God* in its truth and purity. But Jesus’ promise does not only apply to men and women who are serving in public ministry. When I do devotions with my wife and children in our home, I’m not doing that because I’m their pastor. I’m doing it because I’m the husband and father in our family. (If truth be told, I learned how to do that not from any pastor or professor but from a very dedicated Lutheran layman who made me an adopted part of his family during those years I served in the army in Germany.) Jesus’ promise applies to all Christians who use his Word, so “representative ministry” means more than that we speak for Christ.

When we speak of representative ministry, our point is usually that we represent the congregation. God has given the Word to his church. That church, in turn, calls some people to administer the gospel publicly on behalf of all. When I stand in front of my congregation and preach, that is a public act that represents the entire body of Christ that meets in that place. But so is every hospital call that I make. We might call that “private” because we don’t invite the whole congregation to join us there and, in fact, that member might confess fears and even sins that I as his or her pastor will take to my grave. But it is a public act because I’m not there just because he’s my brother in Christ. I’m there because I was called to be his pastor and the care I am offering him is spiritual care done on behalf of the entire congregation.

To perform that public, representative ministry, you need “a proper call.” The technical term for this comes from the Latin of AC XIV, *rite vocatus*, “rightly” or “properly called.”⁴ What does *rightly called* mean? The call is God’s action. The Holy Spirit works through the church and he appoints a man or a woman to serve. “Rightly” is the human part. It refers to the fact that everything we do is done in a fitting and orderly way, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:40. What constitutes doing it in a fitting and orderly way?

Within the WELS, when it comes to calling pastors, we have a fairly uniform practice. The calling body informs the district president that it wants to call a pastor. He holds a “pre-call meeting” in which he discusses the needs of that congregation or school or mission and conducts a Bible study on the meaning of a divine call and how we apply that in our synod’s calling process. He then provides a call list to a call meeting. The list is received, discussed and a vote is taken. Once a choice is made, the call is made unanimous, and someone is delegated to inform that prospective pastor. He receives a call packet which contains various documents, but the most important item is a piece of paper that we call the “diploma of vocation.” This is the formal call document. With some minor variation, this is what we usually mean by being “properly called” or *rite vocatus*.

There are some assumptions that go into the *rite* or “properly” part of this equation: you don’t angle for a call, you destroy the ballots and return the call information forms and you don’t gossip about whose names were used to avoid unspiritual attitudes about the work God is doing. But would any of this apparatus be necessary for the call to be “proper” or “orderly”? No.

⁴ The authoritative edition of the AC is actually the German, not the Latin, so by rights the German expression “*ordentlichen Beruf*” should have become the term. But to be a real theologian, you have to speak Latin. That’s just the way it is.

“Orderly” is a little bit in the eye of the beholder, or at least, in the eyes of the congregation and wider fellowship that is calling. Scripture doesn’t say one word about diplomas of vocation or pre-call meetings or even district presidents – as much as we appreciate and value ours and the counsel he brings. The importance of those things is that we have agreed that this is the proper and orderly way to do it here today. When it comes to teacher calls, we sometimes shorten the process by delegating the authority to call to the board of education or to the church council. In the WELS, it would be unusual for a pastor or teacher not to receive a formal call form. But that’s because that form is a big part of the way that we conceive of making the process orderly.

The important thing is that God’s people treat the call as the way that God works through the church to designate the men and women who represent them in administering the gospel, so we agree to act in certain ways. We recognize that we are free to do something else, if we all agree. But we are not free to introduce chaos or disorder into the process. We are not free to make choices that will cause the people we call or the congregations they represent to doubt the validity of the calls we issue. We certainly are not free to introduce any element that denies the work of the Holy Spirit in calling or that in any way, shape or form allows for false doctrine or unscriptural practices to be a part of our process. *Rite vocatus* means that we are seeking the Lord’s will in a planned and organized way that strives to be faithful to God’s Word and to uphold the truth that every call we issue is the Lord’s call transmitted through the church.

Clergy and laity or clergy vs. laity?

In a Lutheran sense, the distinction between lay and clergy is simply whether someone has a call to public ministry or not. When our members speak of “laymen” and “clergy,” they’re usually contrasting the work they do as members of the congregation with the work of someone who has received special training and has dedicated their lives to serving the Lord on a more or less full-time basis. There’s nothing wrong with either of these two ways to understand the distinction between clergy and laity. When we speak this way, we will be understood correctly most of the time. But there is a technical meaning behind these words that carries with it a heavy dose of Roman Catholic theology. Unfortunately, that latent Catholic understanding can permeate our thinking and perpetuate confusion if not false understanding. Words matter. At the heart of the Catholic concept of “clergy” lies another important word and concept: “priest.” Because of the biblical usage of that word and concept, it also lies at the heart of our understanding of the ministry of the gospel.

What is a Priest?

The Catholic Church teaches that when a man is ordained, he receives an “indelible character” – a kind of mark on his soul. The 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church says in regard to ordination:

1581 This sacrament configures the recipient to Christ by a special grace of the Holy Spirit, so that he may serve as Christ's instrument for his Church. By ordination one is enabled to act as a representative of Christ, Head of the Church, in his triple office of priest, prophet, and king.

It goes on to say:

1583 It is true that someone validly ordained can, for a just reason, be discharged from the obligations and functions linked to ordination, or can be forbidden to exercise them; but he cannot become a layman again in the strict sense, because the character imprinted by ordination is forever. The vocation and mission received on the day of his ordination mark him permanently.

The practical effect of the Catholic teaching is to elevate an ordained person (a deacon, a priest or a bishop) into another spiritual class. Ordination configures the one ordained to Christ and in the case of a priest, gives him the power to transubstantiate the bread and wine in communion into the body and blood of Christ.

The scriptures teach nothing of the sort. It is not my ordination that enables me to officiate at the Lord's Supper. It is not my ordination that authorizes me to preach on Sunday or to give a paper like this at a conference or convention. My ordination is simply the way that we declare to the world and especially to our own members that I have completed the training our synod feels is necessary for a pastor to be prepared to do those things. It's done when a pastor is installed into his first call, so it does indicate that he's dedicating his life to full-time service. It's done publicly with the prayers of the calling body and other pastors joining in. But my ordination did not raise me above God's people or give me any special power to administer the Word or the sacraments. So what does enable me to administer the gospel? My call from God through the church.

Yet, there is a real distinction that does matter. Not everyone has a call to public ministry. Not everyone wants or should have one. If we were all pastors, how would any work ever get done in the church (1 Corinthians 12:14-20)? I hope and pray that God teaches me to treasure the lay people in my congregation every day that I serve in the ministry. My call is to serve God by serving them. Their needs, their preferences (when they don't contradict scripture), their hurts and challenges and joys, their need to be equipped to serve God and each other, are the reasons God sends men and women to minister to them. Our job is to apply the law and the gospel to their lives.

They have a call, too, or at least a calling. (If we want to reserve the term "call" for public ministry that would probably be a good thing.) Jesus told the whole church to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). Jesus told the whole church to bind the sins of the impenitent and to loose the sins of the penitent (Matthew 16:19; 18:18; – see also Brug, pp. 37-38). Peter tells all Christians to always be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have, but to do it with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15,16). The gospel does not belong to us pastors. It belongs to the church. In fact, pastors only preach publicly because the church delegates that office to them.

We sometimes call this the priesthood of all believers. What does it mean to be a priest from a biblical perspective? A priest is someone who has access to God. In the Old Testament, under the Mt. Sinai covenant only the descendants of Aaron could be priests and so only they could offer sacrifices, only they could enter the Holy Place and only the high priest could go into the Most Holy Place and stand symbolically in the very presence of God before the atonement cover of the ark of the covenant. To do that, he had to first offer a sacrifice for his own sins and then he could serve as a mediator for the people. He could sacrifice and pray for them.

All that was a picture of Jesus, our great high priest, who offered his life to pay for our sins. When Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the temple that divided that Most Holy Place

from the rest of the temple and kept all the non-priests and even the lower order priests out of the presence of God was torn in two. God's unseen hand ripped down the divider and God declared that now all believers can come in. We can come in because we are now holy in his sight. In the Old Testament, God declared, "No one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20). In the New Testament, God shows us his glory in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). We need no mediators, because there is one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).

So every Christian can approach God in prayer. Every Christian can know that they are forgiven and loved. Every Christian can take up the means of grace and use them. As a father, I have often told my children that their conduct was sinful. I have also often had the rich privilege of assuring them that Jesus died for them and they are forgiven. Pastors aren't the only fathers who get to do that. All Christian fathers do. Long before I became a pastor, I shared my faith with people I knew. All Christians who know unbelievers get to do that, not just future pastors.

But there is more to being a priest. In the Old Testament, the Levites were all in the ministry, but they didn't all preach or offer sacrifices. All the temple service was a part of their ministry. In Acts chapter six, the apostles were overwhelmed by the need to distribute food to the widows and orphans in the very large Jerusalem congregation. They called seven deacons to take over that work so that they could devote themselves to the ministry of the word and prayer. The apostles laid hands on those seven deacons and prayed over them. Every indication in the book of Acts is that the service of these men was part of the ministry. Those pictures of public ministry help us to see the concept God has for a priest: all that a member does to support the work of the gospel – indeed, all that a believer does to serve his Lord – is part of that priesthood of all believers.

Let's not pass over that too quickly. Some of the most important things that happen in our congregations never show up on a report at a voters meeting. They're simply done by priests serving their Lord with their lives and with the gospel. Every Christian parent who sets an example for their children in life and faith and teaches them to know their Savior is living as a priest. Every day that they get out of bed and go to work to take care of those children and to be able to help the poor and to bring an offering to the Lord is priesthood ministry. It lies at the heart of all we do as the body of Christ.

The flip side is also true: all that any believer does as a part of the public administration of the gospel is public ministry. God instituted one ministry of the gospel (AC V) that includes priesthood and called ministry. Many of our writers have explained this using the terms *class*, *genus* and *species* (see Thomas Nass, "What is 'divinely instituted' and what is 'necessary' in regard to the public ministry?" p.1; Fredrich, p. 15 among many others).⁵ The class is the broadest category. As Fredrich says, it includes "All Christians, all of whom have the right to speak the gospel." This is what AC V is referring to when it says, "God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments." Next comes the genus, which we usually represent as breaking the class into two parts (genera). Fredrich describes them as: "Specially called ministers of the gospel" and "Lay Christians." Finally, the genus of called workers is further broken into specific species: pastors, teachers, missionaries, etc. The point of speaking like this is to make it clear that the called ministry and the priesthood of all believers are the same thing in their essence. They both proclaim the gospel. But they differ in their function.

Does that seem like splitting hairs? I can understand if you feel that way. But the reason it feels that way is that there is no essential difference between what a public minister does and

⁵ I'm not a big fan of this terminology for the simple reason that I can never remember which term "goes on top" – that is what is the wider term and which is the subdivision. But if you're into taxonomy, this may be helpful.

what a member of the priesthood of all believers does. We all have access to God. We all have the law and the gospel. The only issue is whether we are acting alone, because we are Christians, or whether we are acting as called representatives of the congregation.

Member Ministry Equals Called Ministry

Maybe it would good to clarify some terms, here. The words *ministry* and *minister* sometimes get lost in a thicket of semantic confusion. The idea behind these words is “service” and “servant.” In that sense, both words have a long history in the English language, and not just in the church. However, when I was growing up, if you spoke of “the ministry” or of a “minister” in respect to your church, almost everyone understood that you were talking about full-time, called servants of the word. In fact, most of the time, we probably meant pastors. In the last few decades, there has been a return to the older meaning of “service” and “servant.” For a while, it was popular to say, “Every man a minister” and we meant that every Christian had service to do in Christ’s kingdom. That certainly is true. But we have a long established practice of referring to “the ministry” and meaning “the public ministry.” Words matter and it would help to keep things clear if we reserved these words for people who are called to serve in the stead of other Christians.

Obviously, pastors, professors, missionaries and synod administrators are called into the ministry. Likewise teachers in our Lutheran elementary schools and high schools are called into the ministry. That sometimes trips people up. When my principal is teaching math, is he really “in the ministry”? The answer is yes, first of all, because his primary call is to proclaim law and gospel. He does that by teaching Bible history, by using law-gospel based discipline, by creating an atmosphere of devotion to Christ even when he and the kids are not talking about faith. It’s also true because the ministry includes the support aspects, just like the Levitical ministry and the ministry of the seven deacons did. So he isn’t “in ministry” and “out of ministry” depending on what he’s doing at this moment. He is a called servant of the Word, doing the work the congregation needs him to do in their behalf, even when he’s teaching math.⁶

But what about members who are involved in ministry? Do they have calls? The answer is yes. Certainly, Sunday school teachers and vacation Bible school teachers are a part of the public ministry. When they teach our children the good news about Jesus they are doing it, not because they’re Christian parents, but because the congregation asked them to – and their Lord through the congregation. That’s true even if they have their own children in class.

Organists and choir directors, too, serve in the public ministry. It’s a supporting role, but it is directly supportive of the proclamation of the gospel. Likewise, communion assistants, lectors and other people who participate in the public worship service are called into the ministry. To be sure, all those people have a limited call. The way we structure the ministry in the WELS, the pastor has the widest scope. He is responsible for all aspects of ministry in his congregation. Teachers, even principals, usually have the scope of their calls narrowed to the children. A staff minister’s call is limited to specific responsibilities. So also, Sunday school and VBS teachers, communion assistants, lectors, congregational evangelists and so on have divine calls. But they are even more limited than a teacher’s call usually is.

What about other people serving in the congregation? Are ushers called? Are the members of my church council and boards called? What about the ladies guild? What about the building committee? If we are going to consistently apply the example and the teachings of

⁶ Which I consider to be the root of all false doctrine. But I digress.

scripture, we have to say that they are all called to public ministry. They are all serving the Lord on behalf of the congregation at large. It is a very highly defined and carefully limited call. It may not even deal directly with the means of grace. But it is ministry. Prof. Brug observes:

When members of the church are trained and called to serve in certain positions within the congregation that help the pastor in the ministry of the Word, this is not, strictly speaking, an exercise of the priesthood of all believers. These positions are additional forms of the public ministry of the church. ... These positions of service may also include auxiliary offices that do not use the means of grace but support their use. (p. 52)

At the same time, it might be useful to make a further distinction in our terminology and in our thinking. Everything that a congregation asks someone to do as its representative is a kind of ministry that brings with it a certain call. But self-evidently, there is a dividing line between those who work directly with the means of grace and those who have supporting roles. It might be best to *talk about* the supporting roles using a different vocabulary than *ministry/minister*. Because we have the separate word *service*, we might avoid some confusion if we spoke of ushers and people who care for the communion ware and replace the candles and clean the church and set up for funeral meals in terms of *service*. It is still service they are rendering to God on behalf of the whole congregation and so you could talk about a very limited call to do so. Our Lord in heaven values the faith that acts in this way just as much as he values the faith that writes sermons and teaches Bible history. But there is value in drawing a line between direct service with the means of grace and those functions that directly assist with that, like elders and even council members on the one hand, and supportive, necessary service that is a blessing to our congregations but that does not involve direct administration of the means of grace on the other.

What would be the advantage of drawing this distinction? On a practical level, it might short-circuit a temptation to view the pastoral and teaching ministries as just jobs that we hire people to do. The more I talk with people about this subject, the more aware I become of a fear among us (especially among our pastors) that we are in danger of losing the clear teaching that God ordained and established the holy ministry, rather than it being a practical arrangement made for convenience. Reserving a special vocabulary for ministry that deals directly with the means of grace (even that done by members) might help us to keep clear in our minds the gift God has given us.

But we should also note that we're talking about a semantic approach to a real world problem. Words matter but concepts matter more. The key concept here is that God calls through the church. God calls some people to dedicate their lives to ministry. God calls other people to part-time, supportive roles, some of which deal with the means of grace, some of which don't. God calls all of us to be priests who use the means of grace and live our Christian lives in his service. I think we want to draw two lines then: one between personal service as a priest and service on behalf of the congregation, and one between supportive service on behalf of the congregation and ministry dealing with the means of grace on behalf of the congregation.

AC XIV lends some weight to making this distinction, when it says, "no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper call." This is the locus on the public ministry and the emphasis is clearly on the means of grace. This reflects the way the scriptures speak as well. St. Paul told Timothy, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). That word "especially" (μάλιστα – *malista*) draws a distinction between elders

(πρεσβύτεροι – *presbyteroi*) whose work is preaching and teaching and those whose work isn't. Both kinds of elders “direct the affairs of the church” but they don't both seem to be called to preach and teach. Now, one could have an important discussion here on the forms of New Testament ministry versus the forms of our ministry today.⁷ But the point remains: there is scriptural precedent for viewing all those who work for the church as “in ministry” but also for making a clear distinction between those who work directly with the means of grace and those who don't. One way we could do that is by the vocabulary we use.

A decade or more ago when I was younger and newer in the ministry of the WELS, we used to hear a lot about honoring the priesthood of all believers by letting them be a part of the public ministry. At best, that formulation was fuzzy thinking. Certainly, we want to utilize the gifts that God gives to his church and we pastors and teachers are not the only gifts God gives. But any time we put a man or woman into a position where he or she is acting on behalf of the congregation, that isn't the priesthood of all believers anymore. By definition, it is public ministry.

Those who do handle the means of grace, at least, need to be *rite vocatus* as the AC says. Practically speaking, what constitutes an orderly way to issue their calls? When it comes to those offices that are directly involved with teaching the Word or administering the sacraments, like Sunday school or VBS teachers or communion assistants, we devalue the ministry of these called workers if we treat their position in too casual a manner. Many of our congregations rightly have the practice of issuing a call form for Sunday school and VBS teachers. While that piece of paper in and of itself does not equal “a fitting and orderly way,” the process it represents does. There is real value in a form that reminds those teachers that they are, in fact, part of the ministry of the Word in our congregation and that they represent the Lord and the congregation that called them. I suspect that fewer of our congregations have such a form for communion assistants, although I know some do. But does their service deal any less with the means of grace? When you consider that the communion assistant often handles the bread rather than the wine, he is the first line (after the ushers) in dealing with unqualified communicants at the communion rail.

If the congregation has delegated the authority to call these people to the pastor or the board of education or board of elders or even the Sunday school superintendent, a phone call from that person asking them to serve is not necessarily disorderly. Again, order is in the eyes of the beholders and congregations often have a history with this sort of thing. But let us take steps to present these calls as just that, calls from the Holy Spirit to serve the Lord by serving his people. However you do it in your congregation, it is fitting and proper that calls into the public ministry, even ministry with a limited scope, be dealt with seriously so that the recipient considers them in a sober, serious and yes, joyful, manner, as an opportunity to participate in the public ministry of the church.

What is “orderly” when it comes to calling council and board members? My congregation empowers a nominating committee to seek qualified candidates. An election is held at a voters meeting, and then the men are installed into their offices. I think we all consider that to be orderly. Yet we often hear a concern about having “a real election” meaning that we have at least two candidates. But what does the word election actually mean? It means that we make a choice. Having one candidate on the ballot and then having the voters confirm him into

⁷ Brug discusses this at various points in his book (see, for example p. 113) and many other Lutherans have weighed in on it. The most likely explanation seems to be that they had a kind of ministry board, with various people “in ministry,” patterned on the organization of the Jewish synagogue which had a council of ruling elders.

office is still a valid choice. The voters could reject that man as unqualified and leave the office vacant. It is not the fact that we have two candidates that makes the election valid. It's the fact that the congregation has designated him to represent them in their service, and in doing so, they serve the Lord. The rite of installation of members who serve the church from *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* recognizes this fact when it has the officiant say to those being installed, "You have been selected for positions of service to our Lord on behalf of this congregation" (p. 299).

The fact that these offices are a part of the public ministry of the church also means that there are qualifications for their service. One of the most unhealthy attitudes in our church body is the idea that if you get a marginal or a new member involved on a board, he'll get more involved in the church. That may be true. But would we ever call an uncommitted pastoral candidate to serve as a pastor in the hopes that as he serves, he'll become really committed to preaching the gospel? Getting new members involved in the congregation so that they learn to lead a Christian life is a laudable goal, as is getting marginal or even delinquent members to be more active in hearing the Word. We need to do those things in an intentional way. But giving them a call, even a very limited call, to the public ministry isn't the right way to get delinquent members active for the simple reason that God sets standards for ministry. In the scriptures, those standards apply to "elders" (Titus 1:6ff), "overseers" (1 Timothy 3:2ff) and "deacons" (1 Timothy 3:8ff), so they cover all those serving in leadership roles, both those directly involved in the administration of the gospel and those who aren't.

The key elements of the requirements are the ability to teach (if that is part of the responsibilities of the office), a Christian life and reputation, and a solid understanding of Lutheran doctrine and practice. I came to my current call during a period of upheaval following a resignation. Part of the reason for the ongoing turmoil was a lack of spiritual insight on the part of some of the leaders of the congregation at that time. At my first meeting of the nominating committee, I announced that I, as the pastor, had a veto over any name that would be suggested. I told them that in addition to vetoing anyone I knew was living in sin, I would veto anyone who did not attend church regularly.⁸

Whether you approach it that way or not, recognize the weighty responsibility you are placing on a man when you call him to be a congregational president or an elder or even a financial secretary. They are going to participate in countless discussions and decisions about the ministry of your congregation. Every official act they do on behalf of that congregation will be done to support the proclamation of the gospel in the place where you live and worship. All that God says about the importance of knowing the gospel and living according to that gospel applies to those leaders. Of course, it applies to communion assistants and teachers of all kinds.

By the way, this is why the synod's model constitution does not allow for nominations from the floor when the voters are electing officers. I can tell the nominating committee that Mr. Smith is not a good candidate for an office at this time and ask them to keep that evaluation private. I can ask them to trust me as their pastor and try to do minimal damage to Mr. Smith's reputation while I deal with whatever issue makes him unqualified. But if his name comes up on the floor of the voters assembly, it's much harder for me to protect his reputation while I counsel against his nomination.

However, there are supporting offices in the church that require less spiritual maturity and carry less authority than serving on a board does. Their service is important. In some cases, we couldn't "do" ministry without them. But does someone have to have a deep understanding

⁸ The church council should have the same right if it knows things the pastor doesn't.

of all the ins and outs of the doctrine of holy communion to set up the altar properly for a communion service? A Christian could rever the sacrament and take comfort in receiving the body and blood of Christ without being able to give a detailed explanation of it. That person could still serve. Again, they are serving the Lord and the congregation, so this is not simply an aspect of the priesthood of all believers. We would not ask someone living in sin to do even this work. But not every requirement of ministry applies to every office in exactly the same way.

Is there a Role for Members in the Public Administration of the Gospel?

Doctrine (teaching) has to be put into practice. We confessional Lutherans believe that what we do should be a reflection of what we believe and confess. That's the whole point of being *confessional* Lutherans – our theology determines everything. So this paper began with a summary of what the Scriptures teach on this issue. But what does the relationship between public ministry and the priesthood of all believers say about the role of congregation members in the public administration of the means of grace in our churches? Is there a role for members?

Simply put, yes. That is the example of the New Testament Church. Again and again, the apostles and their representatives appointed local men to serve their congregations in public ministry. Now, they were not the only ones called to serve them. But the apostles did not establish some kind of priestly caste that stood above and apart from the people. They involved believers in the public ministry. Those workers were qualified, according to biblical standards – in fact the lists of standards given in the pastoral epistles originally were given to make clear who could be called to serve those local congregations and who couldn't. The men (and probably in some cases women) who were called were all *rite vocati*, properly called into public ministry in a way that was fitting and orderly for that time and place. So today, it is fitting and proper, it conforms to the example and to the teaching of the scriptures, to call men (and where appropriate women) to serve as a part of the public ministry of our local congregations. The calls are generally going to be limited calls, under the supervision of the pastor. But they will be calls nonetheless.

Wrestling with Who We Are and What We've Done Before

Our doctrine determines what we do. But that does not mean that we have a rule for every situation. Rather, making our practices reflect what we confess means wrestling with choices and options. We ask ourselves, what do our members understand? What do visitors understand? What do other Christians understand by what we do?

When it comes to our liturgy, we often invoke the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which could be translated, "What the people pray is what the people believe." In other words, the things you say over and over again, especially in worship, are what people remember and take to heart. So it matters what hymns you pick, how you confess your sins, what canticles you sing, and so on.

You can expand the principle to include all that we do, especially when it comes to the administration of the means of grace. What the people see is what they believe. Conversely, what they don't see is generally going to seem foreign to them. So introducing things that they haven't seen will often provoke an emotional response. Negative responses could run the whole gamut from, "I don't like that" to "That's not Lutheran" and hit every stop in between ("We never did that before" "That seems Catholic" "That's just weird" "Why do we have to try to be

like everybody/nobody else?”). We shouldn't be surprised by these reactions. Practices that are hallowed by tradition and usage are not easily changed. Lutheran people will generally consider the things they've done all their lives in church as the right/Lutheran thing to do. Something different or strange is going to feel un-Lutheran to them, even if it isn't.

That leads naturally to a hard question: what do we mean by tradition? Sometimes, the word tradition refers to the tradition of the wider Christian church (at least in the West) that has been handed down for generations and hallowed by centuries of Christian usage. The Catholic Church sometimes makes use of the Vincentian Canon, a rule coined by St. Vincent of Lerins, which uses the test, “that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.”

In recent years, there has been a revival of interest in the WELS in *practices* that would meet a similar kind of test – that which has been done everywhere (in the Western church), always (or at least for centuries), and by all. Those who advocate this test of “catholicity” reject the old WELS criticism (which I often heard growing up): “That's Catholic!” They have a point. We use the Rite of the Western Church as the basis for our liturgy. We use the ecumenical creeds. A great deal of our theological language has antecedents in Catholic theology before Luther. Even the structure of our ministry, with a pastor as the general overseer of doctrine and practice within a parish, stems from a pre-Reformation heritage. Another use of the word “tradition” – sometimes by the same people within the WELS – focuses on Lutheran tradition at the time of the Reformation and thereafter. We do owe a great debt in our practice to those Lutherans who went before us.

But some of these same people seem to have a blind spot when it comes to the traditions of the Synodical Conference and especially the traditions of the WELS, to say nothing of the traditions of local congregations. We have consciously dropped elements of our pre-Reformation heritage, like calling our pastors “priests,” because the false teaching of Rome has so thoroughly contaminated those elements. So “the tradition” is not a norm we have to satisfy. Sometimes the WELS or an individual congregation has traditions that differ from what was done in the Lutheran Church at the time of Luther or what has been done throughout the western Christian world. We must be very cautious about assuming that those older, broader traditions must always prevail. The AC notes, “For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by human beings, be observed everywhere” (Article VII, Kolb-Wengert).

So how do we decide what to change and what to leave the same? Especially when it comes to the issue of involving members in the public administration of the gospel, what needs to stay the same and what innovations are good and salutary for us to implement? Obviously, we don't want to do anything that will cause doctrinal confusion. What the people see and hear every Sunday will have a profound effect on what they instinctively view as good Lutheran and scriptural practice. So we want to make sure that what we do in our worship services upholds the doctrine of the public ministry as revealed in scripture.

But Christians of good will are still going to disagree sometimes. God has given us freedom where he has not spoken. So when we wrestle with these kinds of issues, it really comes down to good sanctified Christian judgment. That means a lot of conversation among pastors, and between pastors, teachers and members. Luther gives some sound, practical advice about worship practices in his *A Christian Exhortation to the Livonians Concerning Public Worship and Concord* of 1525. He notes that in the past, the Roman Catholic Church held

councils to deal with confusion in practices by legislating what would be allowed and what wouldn't. Luther says that people who "devise and ordain universal customs and orders get so wrapped up in them that they make them into dictatorial laws opposed to the freedom of faith" (LW:AE vol 53, p. 46). But at that same time, "those who ordain and establish nothing succeed only in creating as many factions as there are heads, to the detriment of that Christian harmony and unity of which St. Paul and St. Peter so frequently write" (p. 46).

When he then offered advice, his first point was to preachers: rather than commanding or demanding anything, "let them so conduct themselves that they establish and preserve unity of mind and spirit among themselves." He is specifically denouncing pride which causes divisions and belittles others. He continues with a paragraph that is very important for our topic:

Now even though external rites and orders—such as masses, singing, reading, baptizing—add nothing to salvation, yet it is un-Christian to quarrel over such things and thereby to confuse the common people. We should consider the edification of the lay folk more important than our own ideas and opinions. Therefore, I pray all of you, my dear sirs, let each one surrender his own opinions and get together in a friendly way and come to a common decision about these external matters, so that there will be one uniform practice throughout your district instead of disorder—one thing being done here and another there—lest the common people get confused and discouraged. (p.47)

He goes on at some length encouraging the congregations in Livonia to have a uniform practice, but at the same time, urging the ministers to take every precaution lest this uniform practice be interpreted as a command from God.

Inevitably in these kinds of discussions, someone is going to say, "This would be better." I think we have to talk about what "better" means. Words matter. Better for whom? Better in what way? Someone might argue that choice A is better than choice B because it won't stir things up. I certainly like peace in my congregation. But what if that peace is based on the acceptance of an unhealthy approach to ministry? What if my people are quiet because I make it too easy for them not to take responsibility? Is that *better*? On the other hand, some people might say that choice B is better than choice A because it's what the people need, even though they aren't going to like it. That may very well be true. But how do you know? Is your assessment based on an assumption: i.e., anything too Catholic is bad or anything too Reformed is bad or "the tradition" is always better? In that case, have you taken into account the realities of your situation? Have you considered the desires and preferences of your people? Certainly, we are not in the "give the people what they want" business. But it is also true that we serve the people of God and every congregation has a core of dedicated, mature members whose judgment is sanctified by a lifetime of study and Christian life experience. Can I ignore their desires and preferences just because I work within a conceptual framework that considers this or that side of something God has left free as "better"?

Better is a tricky word. Obviously, we aren't going to do something we think is worse. But what makes something better? Am I going to patiently listen when people challenge my beliefs about what is better? I personally operate within the conceptual framework that un-Lutheran practice is not better. But I fear that it will be hard to find a universal agreement on what is Lutheran and what isn't, even within the WELS.

Another word that inevitably comes up in these discussions is *should*. There are at least four ways that we commonly use the word "should." (For a quick explanation, see p.1 of "The

Use of ‘Should’ and ‘Must’ in the Translation of the New Testament” by the WELS Translation Liaison Committee.) The one that concerns us here is sometimes called the deontic usage: *should* expresses an obligation. It can come from God’s moral law, or governmental law, or even the will of the speaker. But this usage of *should* affirms that this is the way something is supposed to be done.

When it comes to areas of Christian freedom, we need to be careful about this word. “We should not have a layman serving communion.” What does *should* mean in that sentence? Most of us are going to hear that as saying that there’s something inherently wrong with the practice, rather than as a statement of preference. If you make that kind of *should* or *should not* statement, the obligation is on you to say why it would be better, what is the source of the obligation, how far it extends and what if we don’t comply with it. Or to put it another way, a *should* statement often strikes at a person’s conscience. If you make it in the church, especially about things that scripture and the Lutheran Confessions allow are free, you need to make sure that you don’t burden a conscience or make up a ceremonial law that God doesn’t give.

Members Publicly Administering the Means of Grace

When it comes to applying all this to the public administration of the gospel, we’re going to have to let different Christians – even within our own fellowship – have different opinions about the wisdom or benefit of some of these questions. But that doesn’t mean we can’t or shouldn’t talk about them.

When I first came into the ministry (1993), there was a great deal of interest in our circles in having laymen and women teach Bible class. You used to hear discussions of “facilitators” and small group Bible studies. I have at times asked members to teach Bible class and even catechism class. In every call I’ve served, there have been at least occasional Bible studies that were “lay led.”⁹ But it doesn’t seem like there’s much controversy among us about doing this. I don’t personally hear as much about it today as I did in the past.

However, any practice that involves laymen participating in public worship has the potential to generate greater controversy. There are ways we do this today which seem to be widely accepted. The most common is communion assistants (in my congregation called “deacons”). Generally speaking, these men commune the pastor and assist him with the distribution of the elements. While the deacons in my congregation also serve as the head usher for that service, I doubt that many congregations in our district have him do much more than that. He probably does not say the words of institution or preside over the communion service in the absence of the pastor.

How appropriate is it for a “layman” to administer communion? In the Lutheran Church as a whole, it’s so unusual for anyone other than the pastor or a “theological student” to actually speak the words of institution and lead the distribution of the elements, that Brug says, “The wisest course of action is to maintain the long-standing practice that administration of Communion under all normal circumstances is the duty of the pastor” (p. 219). Likewise, Nass lists “administration of the sacraments” along with “formal preaching in worship services,” “general doctrinal and spiritual oversight,” and “worship leading” as “four functions [of the

⁹ Upon further review, I’m not sure it’s a good idea to call them that. There’s a difference between members deciding to get together to read and study the Word and an arm of the congregation’s ministry. An interesting question arises here: if a small group chooses a leader or one arises naturally from among them, do they now have a call, even if the whole congregation has not established this position?

pastoral ministry] not generally shared with others” (“The Pastoral Ministry As A Distinct Form Of The Public Ministry”).

A number of venerated pastoral theology textbooks have addressed this issue (see Habeck, “Who May Officiate at the Lord’s Supper?” to get a taste of their wrestling). Almost always, the underlying assumption is a situation in which the pastor is away. Sometimes, they felt it was necessary to justify even a seminary student taking on this responsibility. The assumption was simply that no layman would ever do this.

In the middle decades of the 19th century when German immigrants were flooding to this country and moving to frontier communities in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin, they rarely found Lutheran congregations. Friedrich Wyneken of the Missouri Synod issued his famous *Notbrief (Emergency Appeal)* to Lutherans in Germany to send pastors because Lutheran children were not being baptized and Lutheran families were going months or years without communion (see E. Clifford Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America* pp. 157-8, for a description). Understand, this was in a cultural setting in which many of those families would have had printed books of sermons by Luther and others (called postils) which they would have used for family worship on Sundays and other days. But they would not have dared to commune themselves.

Luther and many other Lutheran theologians imagined situations in which Christians found themselves alone, stranded in a desert or taken captive by the Turk. They generally held that those Christians could designate one of their number as the pastor and call him to administer the means of grace, including administering communion (*To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* LW:AE vol. 44, p. 128, see also Brug, pp. 306-310) but there is little or no evidence that Lutherans on the frontier in America did anything of the sort.

Even quite recent Lutheran sources have argued against having lay members administer communion in the pastor’s absence. The WELS Q & A at www.WELS.net had at least two entries in recent years that advised congregations that “the regular practice of the Lutheran church has been that only pastors acting in the name of the congregation” consecrate the elements. While both articles allowed that a congregation could call a member to do this work, they advised a “reading service” in which a “layman” reads a sermon prepared by the pastor and he conducts the liturgy, but no communion is celebrated.

There is a very strongly ingrained Lutheran feeling that only the pastor should actually administer the Lord’s Supper, which in most people’s minds would probably include speaking the words of institution and “being in charge” of the distribution. There are some excellent theological reasons for this. Prof. Brug writes:

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. 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. ...

Lutheran teachers have debated whether or not a layperson should ever consecrate or administer the Lord’s Supper. Many orthodox dogmaticians said that even in the case of emergency, this should not be done. (p. 118)

At the same time, this doesn't mean we can't do it, in the sense that it would be unscriptural. Brug goes on to note that when there's a special need, the congregation could issue "an orderly call to a member of the group to serve as the temporary pastor of the group" (p. 119). But the wording he uses shows how exceptional he feels that would be. Certainly, with all the weight of Lutheran counsel against it, we would have to be very certain it was the right thing to do in our situation. But in Christian freedom, a congregation has the right to say within its own parish, what their practice will be, as long as they don't descend into legalism or call other Lutherans who apply the doctrine of church and ministry differently un-Lutheran.

Should a congregation call a member to be a communion administrator (and at least one congregation in our district is considering doing so), all the scriptural qualifications for public ministry would apply. The congregation would need to make some provision for the concern that Brug raises for dealing with who should be admitted to the Lord's Supper. The communion administrator would need to function under the clear spiritual supervision of the pastor. I assume that if such a call were issued, that administrator would only function independently when the pastor was not there.

Even if all that were true, a congregation should not rush into instituting something that would be so unusual among Lutherans. Very careful doctrinal instruction of the congregation would be necessary. Very careful consideration of practical issues would need to happen. Perhaps the hardest part of all this, Christian love would need to be shown to sensitive consciences that were bothered by this. If instituting a system like this caused faithful members to feel like they were sinning if they communed without the pastor administering the sacrament, it would be better not to have a communion service when the pastor can't be there, than to trouble the consciences of faithful members. Even if a congregation is satisfied that their decision will be well understood by those in their church, they still have a responsibility to the wider fellowship. Will it cause problems in other congregations? At the very least, being brotherly would seem to imply that the area pastors talk about it and evaluate what impact it could have beyond the walls of that parish.

There was a time in our synod in which even communion assistants were unheard of and they only gradually became as common as they are today. For that reason, many older Lutheran writings even discuss what the pastor should do who wishes to commune more frequently than at pastors' conference. A solution that often gets mentioned, at least in passing, is self-communion, that is, the pastor communes himself during the worship service, rather than having a communion assistant do it. Some pastors in the Michigan District today are practicing self-communion as a regular part of their congregations' communion service.

This may seem like a strange or even "Catholic" custom to many WELS people today, but Luther followed the prevailing Roman Catholic custom of self-communion in the order for the Latin Mass that he published in 1523 (often called *The Formula Missae* – LW:AE vol. 53, pp. 29-30). It was also included in the earliest Lutheran *Kirchenordnungen* or church orders, the legal documents that regulated church practice after the Reformation in Germany. Habeck noted in 1968 that he believed that self-communion was being practiced "in some bodies that are in fellowship with us" (p. 305). Precht (*Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, p. 438), and others point to C.F.W. Walther's comments which also allowed for it.¹⁰ So Habeck concluded,

¹⁰ In fact, Precht considers the suggestion to use communion assistants made by J.C.H. Fritz in 1932 (long after Walther was dead) to be "a then novel suggestion in the [LCMS's] history." I have recently been informed that the manual for the LCMS' new hymnal positively *instructs* pastors to commune themselves. I cannot verify this.

“Roundly to condemn self-communion, when it has the example of antiquity and the opinion of respected Lutheran theologians in its favor, would be presumptuous” (p. 309).

Yet, it’s clear that he’s not really in favor of it. In the 17th century, nearly all German Lutheran churches positively prohibited the practice and Lutheran theologians like John Gerhard speak against it (Habeck, p. 308, Harjunpaa p. 157). Some defenders of the practice claim that it fell out of use as the Lutheran Church in the 17th century began to require an announcement for communion which was really an opportunity for private confession because you can’t confess to yourself (see Toivoo Harjunpaa “The Pastor’s Communion”).

Luther does not directly address the issue in his German church order of 1526 (the so-called *Deutsche Messe* LW:AE vol. 53, especially pages 81-84). This has led some people to argue that Luther didn’t change it, so he must have been in favor of it, while other say he discreetly avoided mentioning it because he was opposed. I was not able to find any other direct reference that Luther ever made to the practice.¹¹ Generally speaking, two arguments are made against the practice. First, communion assumes a giving and a receiving (the *dosis* and the *lepis*, the Greek words for “giving” and “receiving”). That requires two people. The second argument may actually resonate more in the WELS today: self-communion “smacks of clericalism” to use Habeck’s words (p. 309). Brug points out that teachers who overemphasize their ordinations downplay the role of members in ministry:

... some romanizing pastors insist that only the ordained pastor is to distribute the bread and the wine because everyone is to receive the sacred species from the hand of Jesus, that is, the hand of the pastor. For the same reason the pastor insists that he must commune himself, because he too must receive the body and blood of the Lord from the hand of Jesus, that is, from his own hand. (p. 324)

I don’t believe that any WELS pastor who practices self-communion wants to give this impression. But I do believe that it is a natural conclusion for members to draw, especially when self-communion is done not because there is no member willing to assist the pastor, but rather because the pastor believes this is what Lutheran and ancient tradition dictate. What the people see in church is what they believe. While it is not my place to judge the practices and ministries of congregations I am not called to serve, introducing this practice, which has been absent from the WELS for over one hundred years, is almost certain to trouble the consciences of at least some members.

A similar issue arises with the absolution. Neither Luther’s German nor his Latin service included a confession of sins. He didn’t take it out; it was never a part of the Catholic mass. Instead Catholic theology required private confession at least once a year. The Lutherans maintained the practice of private confession but they changed the emphasis. In Roman Catholicism, confession is an obligation. It only takes effect if a proper satisfaction, or work to show your sorrow over sin, has been completed. Rome made confession a work that tortured consciences. Luther understood the gift God gives us in confession and he stressed the absolution, the forgiveness the pastor imparts. That is the real heart of the ministry of the keys. At times, Luther was even willing to call confession a sacrament because he saw it as a rich tool to assure penitent sinners that Christ has taken their guilt away.

¹¹ If you know of one, please share it with me. I have found a number of people claiming that this or that work refers to self-communion (both for and against), but they never seem to give specific references and I have not had the time to pour through the whole works that they cite.

But he saw no need to include a public confession in the worship service, nor did early Lutherans generally. How it came to be the standard approach is beyond our scope. But for generations, Lutherans have included a public confession and absolution in most of our worship services. Most of us who grew up in the WELS before *Christian Worship* was published in 1993 heard our pastors say on every communion Sunday,¹² “Upon this your confession, I, by virtue of my office as a called and ordained servant of the word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost” (TLH p. 16). This wording – especially underlining “ordained” – certainly reinforced the idea that the absolution is something only the pastor does.

Luther’s Small Catechism also contributes to that impression. When it discusses confession,¹³ it says, “Confession has two parts. The one is that we confess our sins; the other, that we receive absolution or forgiveness from the pastor as from God himself, not doubting but firmly believing that our sins are thus forgiven before God in heaven.” And again, “But before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts.” And finally, “How will the pastor assure a penitent sinner of forgiveness?” (Kuske, p. 12). Nowhere does the catechism explicitly discuss members using the ministry of the keys privately, although it does clearly state the power to forgive is given to the church and even under the heading “The Public Use of the Keys” it speaks of the congregation’s “called servant of Christ” rather than its pastor (Kuske p. 11). But I think generations of memorizing these parts of the catechism have tended to make the usage of the loosing key, especially when it’s done publicly in the worship service, a function of the pastor in the minds of many (most?) of our members. In my experience, members who are troubled by a member administering communion are also troubled by a member announcing the forgiveness of sins.

As a matter of Christian freedom and good order, we could decide that only our pastors are going to pronounce the absolution in a public worship service. So if we have a lay member conduct the service while we’re on vacation, we should omit the confession of sins. But Christ gave the keys to the church, not to the public ministry. I hope and pray that we teach all members to be active in forgiving sin, and in withholding forgiveness when a brother or sister is not repentant, as a part of being priests of God. When we call a man to conduct a public worship service, even if it’s to do it only once while our pastor is on vacation, we most certainly can call him to announce the grace of God to the entire congregation in the form of the absolution. *Christian Worship* seems to have removed all references to being “ordained” in the absolution (pp. 13, 16, 26, and 38), so even a member who’s leading a reading service would be able to use it as written. But again, we must understand where our members are spiritually before we simply impose something like this on them.

Divine Calls and God’s Church

Words matter. I firmly believe that. It matters if our members are public ministers or private priests. It matters because God’s Word matters. It matters because we honor God when

¹² Presumably the more generic wording in the page 5 liturgy was written that way to allow for a member led “reading service.”

¹³ It should be noted that Luther did not write the section on the Ministry of the Keys and Confession in our catechism and they are not a part of the Book of Concord, although they were added to Luther’s Catechism well before 1580.

we honor his word and speak carefully. I have tried to speak carefully throughout this paper in hopes that we all grow in our understanding of that word.

In many ways, this whole conversation is uniquely Lutheran. Last week, the same Lutheran layman that taught me how to do home devotions reminded me that the priesthood of all believers lies at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation. God gave the Word back to members without needing a priest to go before them. The balance that God strikes between called shepherds and priests living sanctified lives in his service is an insight that almost no one sees as clearly as the Lutheran Church does. Almost every Lutheran who studies the doctrine of church and ministry reaches the conclusion that the Lutheran Church has been wrestling with this teaching for five hundred years. We should expect to wrestle with it, too.

Like so many things that we have to wrestle with, in many ways this whole discussion comes down to an application of Christian freedom, another uniquely Lutheran insight. God has not given us a rulebook where we can look up paragraphs and subparagraphs and find the appropriate regulation for every aspect of our life or our ministry. God gives us principles and he calls us to apply them to our real lives in a sinful world. That can be extraordinarily hard.

But we worship God when we honestly and faithfully wrestle with what his word says and how best to put it into practice in our lives and our churches today. Our answers won't necessarily be the same as Luther's answers or those of the Synodical Conference founders. Our answers might not even be the same as the ones the WELS congregation across town gives. But we worship our Lord when we study his word and seek the best way to apply it.

When we do that, we need to remember some truths about Christian freedom. The first one is that it is not license to do anything and everything. We 21st century Americans operate with a very different definition of freedom than God has in mind with Christian freedom. We are not free to sin. We are not free to devalue his word or to do things that cause confusion. We need to be careful of the formulation, "it can be understood correctly" because quite often when we say that, we're really making an excuse for something that tends to be understood poorly.

To properly apply Christian freedom, we need to know what God's word says and what it doesn't say about the question we're wrestling with. We need to be willing to defy our society when God's definitions don't match what our society thinks freedom should really be.

The driving force in our applications needs to be love. Not a feeling, but a commitment to doing what is best for the ones we love. We are committed to giving glory to God in the choices we make. We are committed to serving the spiritual needs of other Christians in our own congregation and in the congregations around us. We are committed to giving a good testimony to believers of other fellowships and to unbelievers. We need to ask ourselves hard questions about how our choices are perceived and understood.

We cannot properly apply Christian freedom to the church and its ministry unless we view God's gifts as something to truly treasure. God gave us the priesthood of all believers. We pastors and teachers need to treasure the gift that God gave us when he gave us members who love the Lord and love to hear his good news. Usually, that means they love us, too, and want to support our work. We need to treasure all the ways that they live their faith. If we value the priesthood of all believers, if we want to encourage real spiritual growth and real lives of service to God, maybe we need to remember to call God's people to simply live as priests. How often don't we equate sanctification to serving on boards and committees or doing stuff at church? The priesthood of all believers is about members coming to God in prayer, confessing to and absolving each other, teaching their children to know the Lord and offering their sacrifices to God – which includes all their good deeds, their parenting, their honoring of their spouses, their

kindness and love to friend and stranger alike. Maybe we need to talk more about that and less about our budgets and our board positions. We need to make sure that we don't give the impression that you're only serving God if you're doing something at church.

God also gave us the public ministry. He instituted it and the church will always need it. We can even say that he guided the growth and development of his church so that he gave us specific forms of ministry, like pastors and teachers and communion assistants and congregational evangelists and board and council members. He could give us other forms. In Christian freedom, we can develop other forms. But every public minister is God's gift to his church. Every pastor, every teacher and every member that God calls to serve is a gift and a treasure.

The church needs both, public ministers and private priests to be healthy and to do the work God has called all of us to do. When we remember that, I think we will do better at giving him glory in the ways that we set up our ministries and the choices we make about what it will look like in each congregation. Let us trust in our Savior and be bold to use the members he gives us to work for the church we serve. Let us be humble enough to recognize the wisdom of the Christians who have gone before us and who live around us, and let us not lightly dismiss tradition and our wider fellowship.

While we wrestle, while we argue and talk and listen, while we deal with our own emotional responses to what is old and what is new, let us constantly pray and ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom. Let us ask him to use the choices we make to strengthen the faith of our members and to testify to the world about our Savior. Then let us trust that the God who loved us and sent his Son to die for us, loves us enough to overcome whatever sin and weakness corrupts our efforts and whatever stupid mistakes we make. Let us trust the God who raised his Son from the dead and seated him at his right hand in heaven and poured out his Holy Spirit on his church is powerful enough to conquer all that the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh do to knock our work off balance. God will overcome through his gospel message. May we be faithful in proclaiming that message.

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