

WHO MAY CELEBRATE THE EUCHARIST AT TPC?

By Pastor Rich Lusk

May 2011

When we at TPC adopted our new church constitution back in October, 2006, that constitution included provision for other church officers (ruling elders and deacons) to administer the Lord's Supper in the absence of the pastor. Our elders wanted to be sensitive to the fact that this would represent a change for many in our church body and did not want to rush to implement this constitutional provision. Thus, up until this point, we have not invoked this feature of the constitution because we have not felt comfortable doing so apart from further discussion amongst the officers and further instruction to the congregation.

Well, the time has now come. The elders have chosen to ask one of our deacons to be the celebrant at the Lord's Supper the next time I am out of town. This practice is not without biblical warrant or historic precedent in the ancient and Reformational eras of the church. But before turning to that data, let us first consider the relationship of pastors to the rest of the congregation.

Of Pastors and People

The church is a kingdom of priests (1 Pt. 2). Thus, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, as aspects of that priestly ministry, belong to the body as a whole. Still, for a variety of reasons, including good order, symbolism, the integrity of the church, and the well-being of her members, it is normally best for the sacraments to be administered by a man who has been ordained and set apart for that task. This is the ordinary, usual pattern we should follow, as laid down in Scripture. In the Old Covenant, Israel was a nation of priests, but still had a special priesthood set apart within the nation to teach the people and lead their sacrificial/sacramental worship (cf. Ex. 19:6; Ex. 29).

The same order holds true in the new covenant. According to Paul there is pastoral office in the new covenant, analogous to the old covenant Levitical priestly office, with special qualifications (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1) and responsibilities (Eph. 4:11ff). In the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 3, some are used by God to plant/water/build, while others are

God's field and building. These metaphors describe the relationship of pastors to the people they serve. In 1 Cor. 9, Paul draws an analogy between old covenant priests and new covenant pastors, showing that while all Christians are part of the *royal priesthood*, there is still a special *servant priesthood* within the body, called and set aside to do special priestly and pastoral tasks. Liturgical leadership is one aspect of this pastoral priesthood. While we are all priests in Christ, with the same holy status and access to God's presence, there is a clear division of labor within the church's priesthood. Paul's pastoral epistles of 1-2 Timothy and Titus, along with the book of Acts, also prove the apostolic church continued to have a special pastoral/priestly office; the early Christians saw themselves as heirs of the polity of the Jewish church, albeit transformed, fulfilled, and renewed in Christ.

The calling of this pastoral priesthood is "from below," as a pastor must be elected and called by a congregation, but also "from above," as he must be gifted and appointed to the office by God himself. Thus, ordination is both an act of the whole congregation and an act of God, and the ordained man acts as a representative of the church as well of God. Pastors are both part of the church and Christ's gifts to the church (Eph. 4:11ff).

The congregation does not approach God through their ordained minister; rather, we all (pastor included) approach God through Jesus, our sole High Priest. The pastor is not any closer to Jesus than any other Christian. But the pastor is ordained to represent Jesus to the community and the community to Jesus in a unique way. Thus, his voice and hands act as the hands and voice of Christ, as he preaches, absolves, baptizes, distributes, and blesses. What he does, he does *for* the community, even *as* the community, as a whole, so that the whole church is acting in and through him when he acts in these ways. This is the system Jesus set up, when he commissioned the apostles and gave the church preachers and teachers (Eph. 4:11-12). Having ordained men lead in this way may not be necessary to the *being* of the church, but it is certainly necessary to the *well-being* of the church, as church history bears out again and again. We're all gifted in different ways, but not everyone is gifted in a way that suits public leadership of the church (1 Cor. 12). Americans might not like it, but the church is not an egalitarian institution. God has established

a pattern of government and authority for his people.

Augustine captured the relationship of pastor to the people best when he spoke about his own work as a bishop this way: “What I am *for you* terrifies me, what I am *with you* consoles me. *For you* I am a bishop; but *with you* I am a Christian. The former is title of *duty*; the latter, one of *grace*. The former is a *danger*; the latter *salvation*.” Augustine knew he had been set apart not *from* the covenant community, but *within* the covenant community, for the sake of serving the people.

In our contemporary context, N. T. Wright has also captured the essence and spirit of pastoral ministry within the life of the local church:

If a Christian is one who is from God in Christ, and if an ordained Christian is one who brings that to clear and focused expression to enable the rest of the church to be the church, our calling is always for the sake of mission, the mission of the church to speak God’s wise foolishness, to act in God’s weak strength, to live out God’s noble humility.

In other words, pastors are called to embody the worship and mission of the church in a unique way, equipping the rest of the body for ministry through their teaching, liturgical leadership, and exemplary lifestyle. The pastor brings the calling of the body as a whole to focused expression in his ministry. The pastor’s calling is to help the church be the church.

Liturgical Fixtures and Flexibility

Reflecting this pattern of pastors and people, which is seen both in Scripture and in the Christian tradition, it makes sense to prefer an ordained man to preach and administer the sacraments, since such a man has been publicly recognized and set apart as a leader in the church specifically for these tasks. Just as the Levites were the pastors of ancient Israel, in charge of teaching the Word and conducting the sacramental meals at the tabernacle/temple, so pastors are called to exercise a similar form of leadership in the new covenant church.

But there also has to be some flexibility, to cope with the messiness of

life. Thus, following the tradition of our fathers in the faith (including the best early Christian teachers and the Reformers), we allow men who have not been ordained to the office of pastor to preach and administer the sacraments *when it is absolutely necessary*. In the absence of a pastor, another man (preferably one who holds another office, such a ruling elder or deacon) can take charge and lead, under the oversight and authorization of the pastor. In the case of baptism, I agree with Martin Luther that even Christian mid-wives or nurses can baptize babies whose lives are in danger, since the need for baptism trumps the need for good order. It's more important to baptize than to have baptism performed in a technically correct way; thus, "emergency baptisms" should be considered lawful and valid, even if irregular.

Note that if preaching and administering the Supper belong to all Christians, without distinction and without qualification, there is no objection to women pastors. And yet Paul forbids women to serve as pastors (1 Tim. 2) so we know that can't be right. I actually hope my ordination provides an added measure of comfort to people who hear me preach and who receive the sacrament from me. Because I'm ordained, they can know that when I declare forgiveness to them, God himself has authorized me to speak that promise and stands behind it, so much so, it is as if God himself spoke from heaven. (This is what the ministry of the keys is about in Matthew 16; see also John 20:19-23.) That's not to say pastoral authority can be *identified* with divine authority -- pastors are sinful, limited, and fallible like every other Christian. But ordination (like vestments, to a lesser degree) reminds people, this is not just Rich Lusk, a private individual speaking to us; rather, this is an ambassador of Jesus Christ, deputized to act as his representative on earth.

Thomas Oden paraphrases Luther's view this way:

"The laity have all the same range of saving graces pertaining to salvation that the clergy have. The benefits of repentance, faith, and baptism are equally shared by all. The laity/clergy distinction is not a spiritual or religious difference, but a functional differentiation of order, wherein some, being allotted a particular duty and guardianship, are by due process set aside and called for representative ministries on behalf of the whole people...If some are made teachers and shepherds on behalf of

the welfare of others, the purpose is that all may share more effectively in the common body of the faithful and become more completely the temple of the Spirit....Christ chose the twelve from among the disciples, and they in turn appointed and ordained elders, overseers, and deacons to enable and actualize the mission of the church. These he instructed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim, teach, intercede representatively, and to guide. The recipients of the tradition communicated this mission to later generations of leaders who were similarly authorized to proclaim, intercede, and guide the church.”

Oden continues, further explaining and grounding the representative nature of pastoral ministry:

“The spiritual priesthood of all believers offers eucharistic sacrifice of prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and oblation to the service of God. Only Jesus Christ is sacrificing priest, being both priest and sacrifice. The Christian minister is a priest in the same sense that all believers are priests, yet he acts representatively for all believers. This ministry is representative of all the members of the church who constitute a holy priesthood...The minister discharges a priestly office as the representative of his fellow-members of the universal priesthood...yet this authority to minister the Word and Sacraments is not derived from them, but from Him who called him to be an ambassador. In Luther's view, the ministerial office rests upon the priesthood of all believers. To the whole church is given the office of the keys, of administering the Sacraments, and preaching and discipline. But not all can preach, and even if they could, there would be great confusion if all should simultaneously wish to exercise shepherding and teaching functions. Hence, ‘the individual members of the congregation agree to transfer their rights to one whom they call and who now acts in their place,’ hence ordination is viewed as ‘the confirmation of the act of transferring in an individual charge the office of the ministry by the many priests to the one.’”

In other words, the one servant priest is entrusted with tasks that belong to the many royal priests. The one acts on behalf of the many when he preaches, prays, baptizes, and celebrates the Eucharist.

But then Oden goes on to deal with exceptional cases:

“In a locale where no effective ministry has yet been provided, where preaching and the Sacraments are lacking, under emergency conditions, according to Luther, lay persons may undertake actions ordinarily reserved for ordained ministers. 'If a company of pious Christian laymen were captured and sent to a desert place and had not among them an ordained priest, and all were agreed in the matter, and elected one and told him to baptize, administer the Mass, absolve, and preach, such a one would be as true a priest as if all the bishops and people had ordained him.' Melancthon adds, 'Where there is, therefore, a true Church, the right to elect and ordain ministers necessarily exists...Augustine narrates the story of two Christians in a ship, one of whom baptized the catechumen, who after baptism, in turn absolved the baptizer.”

Of course, Luther's liturgical flexibility was rooted in the historic practice of the church. The church father and martyr Ignatius wrote in his “Letter to the Church at Smyrna” (dated early 100s), “Let that eucharist be considered valid which is under the bishop *or him to whom he commits it.*” Ignatius had as high a view of the office of bishop/pastor as anyone in the early church, but he apparently believed the bishop could designate someone else to celebrate the Eucharist in his absence. If the church was already making provisions for communion in the absence of bishop or pastor within a generation of the apostles, our practice (like Luther's) can hardly be considered a novelty.

Sacramental Presidency in Presbyterianism

Luther's view that pastors should normally preside over the sacraments, but exceptions can be made, is rather mainstream among classical Protestants, though with some admitted inconsistencies. In traditional Presbyterianism, only pastors/teaching elders administer the sacraments; other men are allowed to preach on occasion even if they do not hold an office. Of course, most Presbyterians today do not take the Lord's Supper very frequently, so there has not been much need to consider “emergency measures” for the administration of the Supper in the absence of an ordained pastor.

In the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, there has been more flexibility. Priests are ordained to a sacramental office, but deacons sometimes have sacramental privileges too. They are typically not allowed to consecrate the elements, but they can lead the liturgy and distribute the elements to the congregation under the oversight of a priest or bishop (who may or may not be physically present in the service). Similarly, in the Methodist church, the sacraments are entrusted to the minister, but deacons are regarded as liturgical assistants to the minister and can perform the sacraments under his oversight. In most contemporary conservative Lutheran churches, pastors are the normal officiants of the sacraments, but deacons who are training for the ministry are allowed to preside at the Lord's table if need arises.

Our form of government at TPC is deeply rooted in the tradition of vintage Protestantism, which in turn can be traced back to the conciliar movement of the medieval period, and from there all the way back to the early church. Our constitution draws heavily from the form of government found in Book 4 of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and the "Form of Government" produced by the Westminster Assembly. In general, we are in full agreement with the traditional view of the pastoral office and the traditional practice of having only ordained pastors administer the Lord's Supper. However, we also find precedent for using other officers in special circumstances, including when a pastor is not available.

Given the difficulty of finding ordained men to come to TPC on a Sunday morning to do the Lord's Supper when I am out of town, the TPC leadership was faced with a choice. Do we simply forgo communion on those weeks? Or do we suspend ordinary church policy in order to partake of the bread and wine even without the pastor present? In the end, we decided (again, with quite a bit of precedent in church history) that it is more important to have the sacrament than to maintain pristine church order. In other words, while both the means of grace and church polity are important, when it comes down to it, having communion is more important than maintaining the uniqueness of the pastoral office. We think this is what Jesus would have us do -- he would rather eat and drink with us under the leadership of a non-pastor, than have us "fast" in worship in order to maintain normal church procedures. Good governmental order is crucial to the life of the church, but it is not an absolute, even

for Presbyterians. To put it another way, the sacramental meal is more important than the officer who serves it.

Also, by using “one of our own” to do the Supper rather than bringing in an outside priest or pastor, we have a much better opportunity to maintain liturgical continuity and pastoral familiarity. The face behind the table will be one that TPC members and regular attenders already recognize as a Spiritual leader in our body, rather than a stranger brought in from another congregation. He will also be someone who knows how our liturgy works on a weekly basis, and so he can execute it with minimum distraction for the congregation.

Please understand that using a deacon as Eucharistic officiant in my absence does not represent some “big change” in our view of church office or church government. Our constitution is quite clear. The absence of a pastor is considered “extraordinary” and so special, emergency provisions kick into effect. In our constitution, the pastor's job description includes “To administer the Sacraments publicly...as the priests under the Law administered the sacrifices.” This duty/privilege does not belong to any other office. The pastor is uniquely ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament. However, our constitution also states, “In times of necessity or in the absence of an officer ordained to administer the Sacraments,” ruling elders and deacons may administer. (The TPC Constitution may be found here: <http://trinity-pres.net/TPC-Constitution.pdf>.)

We are announcing this now so that if any of you want to raise questions or study the matter further, you have an opportunity to do so. Obviously, the above has been something of a crash-course in church government (or at least a few aspects of it), and may be all too brief for some of you to really understand what's going on or why it matters. Thus, we want to make sure you have a chance to raise any concerns or questions with us personally. Feel free to contact me so we can chat about it as much as needed.