

Lay Leadership at the Lord's Supper

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh posting is a case study in Gospel-grounded theology where the rubber hits the road. Its author, Timothy Hoyer, is an ELCA pastor in the state of New York. He's also a Seminex grad. The case he makes sounds compelling to me. What do you think? Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Bishop's Decisions Regarding the Offering of the Lord's Supper

(Authorizing lay persons to preside at Holy Communion when no ordained person is available to do so.)

Jesus offers us his supper with these words, "Take and eat, this is my body given for you..This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me."Jesus tells Peter that unless Peter has his feet washed by Jesus then Peter will have no part of Jesus. Unless Peter is washed by Jesus' death and rising Peter gets nothing of what Jesus offers by his death and rising, namely, Christ's mercy for the ungodly, forgiveness of sin, salvation, and eternal life, all authenticated by God raising Jesus from the dead.

Jesus offers us his body and blood. As he is the one crucified and risen, just his offering of himself is a good enough reason for us to trust his offer. And, as Luther said, if we but pinch ourselves we feel our need for him to forgive us.

Our bishop, following the example of the former bishop, has renewed the Office of Bishop's guidelines on who may preside at the Lord's Supper, when the Lord's Supper may be received and who may receive it.

"Good order" is the foundation for those guidelines. "We want to limit it (allowing appropriately trained lay persons to preside) for the sake of good order." "This is not a matter of 'rights and privileges' so much as good order."

"Good order," though very Lutheran, is not Lutheran enough to be a good reason. Lutherans pour the foundation of their theology on being made right with God by faith in Christ alone. "Good order" is not a foundation, but a tool to help us keep the foundation of Christ under one another's lives so that we may build our lives on faith.

Thus, the foundation of being made right with God by faith in Christ alone gets to be the foundation of who may receive the Lord's Supper when, and who may offer the Lord's Supper. We get to ask, "Is what we do or urge to do based on Christ? Does what we do or urge give comfort to consciences (give the benefits of Christ to people)?" The guidelines are not based on the foundation of being made right with God through faith in Christ.

The guidelines state the following conditions that should be met before the Bishop gives permission for who receives the Lord's Supper when, and who offers it:

- 1. a serious effort has been made to find an ordained*

person;

2. it's an emergency situation, such as illness of the pastor;
3. for the sake of the mission of the church (as when there is a pastoral vacancy, isolated or special situations).

Vacation time is not a condition, even if the previous conditions have been fulfilled. Instead, the congregation is to do without the Lord's Supper and receive Christ's goodness through other means. The only other means according to our Confessions are the proclamation of forgiveness, baptism, believers speaking forgiveness in Christ's name to one another, and through the "mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters."

The guidelines suggest that "we be constantly watching for God's presence in the word, bible study, worship, song, communal life and prayer (to name just a few)." However, it is to put a burden on us to be watching for God's presence, as if we don't keep a sharp enough lookout we will miss it.

Christ comes to give us his merciful presence. He plunks it right down in front of us. We won't watch for it on our own because we are unable to do so. Also, to watch for God's presence is not the best way to put the good news. Unless God's presence is based on Christ making us right with God through faith alone, then the presence of God is law and wrath. For example, God's presence to the people of Israel was frightful and made them fear that if they saw God they would die. Who wants to watch for that?

Instead of God's presence through the law, we are given Christ as our mediator and as our peace with God.

Also, to watch for God's presence in the word and in bible study can show God's presence as law or as gospel. Law is not

good news. To watch for God's presence in worship or song is dubious because the words used in worship, as happens frequently in "contemporary worship," are often legalistic or assume we can just praise God and don't even mention Christ as the reason we can praise God.

Prayer is not a means of grace, for it is not something that gives faith (trust that God is present in Christ with mercy) but is an expression of faith. The guidelines assume that the Bishop's permission is required. The Bishop's permission may be the way the present system for "good order" operates. But what is the reason for the present system? Why do we work that way? Why does a congregation need to ask permission to give the gospel when that gospel is given through the means of the Lord's Supper? The guidelines say: "There are reasons why we do things a certain way and why we have made exceptions and allowances.' What are those reasons? Such reasons are usually based on abuses in the past. What are they?

A congregation calls a pastor to proclaim to them that by faith in Christ they are right with God. Faith comes from the preaching of Christ. To make sure faith in Christ is given and to keep everyone from speaking at the same time, one person is chosen to do the proclaiming (good order). If the pastor cannot be present, why can't the congregation call someone to proclaim for one Sunday? That way, Christ is proclaimed, faith is given, and good order is still kept.

The guidelines would prevent lay people from presiding at mid-week services for the sake of good order rather than assisting a congregation in its mission of proclaiming Christ by letting someone from the congregation preside at those mid-week services. Good order should not trump the giving of the gospel. The concern should not be to prioritize good order but to put proclaiming the gospel first.

After all, the bishop's authority is to proclaim the gospel, offer forgiveness of sins, and to administer the sacraments (Augsburg Confessions 28). Thus, the bishop gets to work to make sure the gospel is proclaimed as much as possible. That is the purpose of the bishop, not the maintaining of good order.

If the guidelines are used as presently suggested, they result in setting conditions such as:

- 1. the congregation must be rich enough to have the Lord's Supper;*
- 2. the congregation must be large enough to have the Lord's Supper;*
- 3. the congregation must be situated in a well populated area;*
- 4. there must be plenty of retired pastors in your area so you can have the Lord's Supper.*

Such conditions do not address the reality that over half of Lutheran congregations are small, in less populated areas, and are not in the sunbelt. The guidelines then limit who may receive the Lord's Supper, when they may receive it, and who may offer it as if Christ's offer itself is insufficient reason to give it. Such limits are not based on Christ or on the need to comfort consciences. When a pastor cannot be present to proclaim that we are right with God through faith in Christ alone, for whatever reason—vacation, sickness, or vacancy—of more concern than who presides at the Lord's Supper should be the preaching of the gospel. Not every Christian has the gift of preaching or can't do it well, and most do not want to get up in front of the congregation and talk. To differentiate between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel is a gift of faith. Too easily, because of our Old Person being curved in on itself, the doing what is right or proper behavior will be presented as what is Christian instead

of Christ being given as our rightness with God; or Christ is made into another law giver, demanding we take the right stand on a social issue, with the result that the good news of Christ making us right with God by faith is not heard.

Thus, if the pastor is absent, and no one in the congregation is competent to distinguish law from gospel, we omit the sermon and instead offer the Lord's Supper as the fulfillment of the scripture readings. For all of scripture testifies to Christ who would die and rise on the third day and that forgiveness in his name would be proclaimed, which is what the Lord's Supper does. To speak the gospel through the words of institution of the Lord's Supper means the gospel will be rightly proclaimed. With every word printed out in the liturgy, that is "safe" for anyone to do.

Instead of the Bishop limiting when and who receives and who offers the Lord's Supper, the Bishop could help congregations offer it—which as AC 28 says is the proper power of the bishop. The Bishop could be creative in devising ways to help congregations proclaim Christ through the offering of the Lord's Supper—recruit the seniors of the congregation, the faithful who are present every week and have time in their retirement to learn how to preside at the Lord's Supper, or help each congregation choose a list of people who can preside so there is always someone there available.

As this issue is discussed, let the reasoning be based, not on rights, privileges, or good order, but on Christ as our rightness through faith and on comforting consciences.

Timothy Hoyer