

Research Notes

Private Celebrations of Holy Communion and Laity Conducting Services of Holy Communion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments chose to close what they called “nonessential gatherings,” in which they sometimes included churches. This made the reception of Holy Communion by our people much less frequent, and in some places impossible. This in turn has raised the question of whether it would be permissible for laity at home with their families and without a pastor to conduct a service of Holy Communion, blessing bread and wine and distributing and receiving the body and blood of Christ. In other places, the idea has been advanced that in a live, online streaming service, the pastor could consecrate bread and wine in the parishioners’ homes remotely.

This led me to search the writings of our Lutheran forebears for any possible guidance.¹ The attached quotations speak against laity conducting Communion services, and also against the idea that there could be any emergency situation that would call for such practices. It is important to remember that the following Lutheran theologians address not the *possibility* that such a lay-consecrated Supper would be the real body and blood of Christ, but only whether such a practice would be in accordance with God’s will.

Luther to Kaspar Huberinus in Augsburg, January 3, 1532²

In Augsburg in 1532, Catholics controlled some of the churches and evangelicals controlled others. Among the evangelicals, however, the Zwinglians were predominant, who denied the real presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in the Supper. In this situation, the question arose of whether laity in Augsburg, not having

¹ Quotations from Luther’s letters are from Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Briefwechsel*, 18 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1930–), hereafter abbreviated WA Br. Quotations from Luther’s Table Talks are from Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Tischreden*, 6 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1912–21), hereafter abbreviated WA TR. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by Benjamin T. G. Mayes.

² WA Br 6:244–245. Huberinus (1550–1553) was a layman trained in theology at Wittenberg who defended Luther’s doctrine in Augsburg against the Zwinglians. In 1535, he was called as an assistant pastor (Diakon) in Herbst, and beginning in 1542 served as senior pastor of various churches. Gunther Franz, “Huberinus, Caspar,” in *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 9 (1972), 701. Online: <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd118707531.html#ndbcontent>.

access to a Lutheran celebration of the Supper, should hold private celebrations of the Supper in their homes.

Grace and peace in Christ! Beware, beware, my dear Kaspar, of the fanatics, that you may have nothing to do with their ministry, as you yourself indicate, so that you may not participate in their calamity. God has already given punishment twice: first, under Münzer, now under Zwingli. I am worried that Augsburg will belong to them completely. If you cannot do otherwise, do as did the Jews in captivity in Babylon, who had to go without temple, without worship, without the use of their Moses, but had to satisfy themselves with the Word seventy years long. For it still cannot be advised that you should begin something of your own in corners.³ Endure this trial and comfort yourself in the meantime with reading and teaching of the Holy Word, and with wishing and praying! As Daniel in Babylon prayed toward Jerusalem, so also you, desiring the Sacrament with sighs [should pray], until God takes notice! With Baptism, the lack is not so great; even under the papacy, people baptized in houses. Therefore you can indeed still baptize and pray there as in the church. Likewise, you can bless marriages in houses, as people elsewhere indeed betroth them [there]; and if it cannot be otherwise, and a [city] council forbids this baptizing, I would rather receive it from Papists with the explanation that we indeed hold their Baptism to be right, but not their faith and teaching in other points. The fanatics have no Baptism nor Sacrament. That's enough now in haste, since I am extremely burdened. Be committed to God, Amen! January 3.

Dr. Martin Luther

Luther, Table Talk Recorded by Anton Lauterbach

Luther addressed the same question in a table talk whose date is uncertain.

Question: Can a father of a household in a case of necessity communicate the Lord's Supper to his family? Dr. Martin Luther responded: By no means! First, because the call is not present. Numbers 11[:28], "Lord, prohibit those who are prophesying." Deuteronomy 4[:10] and 6[:6]: "Put your hearts toward all my words." Acts 2[:17] and Joel 2 [3:1]: "And it will happen in the last days, etc." It follows that people who are not called should not dare to preach. It is still more fitting that they should not dare to administer the Sacrament of the Lord's

³ That is, in private assemblies. Luther had apparently heard of the secret celebrations of the Supper in the Carmelite Cloister; cf. WA Br 5:528.17ff.

Supper, in order to avoid offenses. For many would not get priests if they could serve themselves.⁴

Luther, Letter to Lorenz Kastner and Colleagues in Freiberg, February 11, 1536

In 1536, Freiberg's churches were Roman Catholic. Lutheran citizens there could not receive the Supper in both kinds (both the Body and Blood of Christ). Many would travel to nearby Leisnig to receive the Supper in both kinds from Lutheran pastors. In a letter Luther answered the question of friends in Freiberg as to whether, in this emergency situation, when the full Sacrament was not being administered in Freiberg, laity could hold private celebrations of the Sacrament in their homes.

Beware! By no means let yourselves be persuaded that every house-leader (*Hauswirt*) may give the Sacrament in his house. For I may teach at home, but I am not thereby a public preacher unless I am publicly called. Thus St. Paul also speaks of the Sacrament, 1 Cor. 11[:21–22]: *We should come together, and not each one make his own Supper.*

Therefore it is not right to say, "The Sacrament is made through the Word, therefore I may make it at home." For it is not God's order and command; but rather He wants the Sacrament to be distributed (*gereicht*) by the public ministry (*Ampt*). For the Sacrament was instituted as a public confession, as Christ speaks: *This do, in remembrance of Me*, that is, as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 11:26]: *Proclaim and confess the death of Christ.*⁵

Johann Benedict Carpzov (Seventeenth Century)

The late 17th-century Lutheran theologian of Leipzig, Johann Benedict Carpzov, addressed this question in his introduction to the Lutheran Confessions.

On the Supper . . . it is disputed among theologians, whether in the case of necessity even a layman is competent to administer the holy Supper? Although many seem to incline toward an affirmative opinion . . . nevertheless *Luther* simply denies it (Tome VI. Jenens. Germ. fol. 339) as something lacking vocation, examples, and the Consensus of Antiquity; moreover, as rejected, as Theodoret proves from Ignatius' epistle to the Trullians, from Athanasius' *Apology Against the Arians*, from Epiphanius' *Heresy* 79 (Book IV, *Ecclesiastical History*, chap. 12). Without doubt, there is no such case of

⁴ WA TR 5:621, no. 6361.

⁵ WA Br 7:366, no. 2296. The same argument was repeated several times by Luther (WA Br 5:528; 6:507–509; 7:167–168, 338–339).

necessity as there is in Baptism, since adults are already in the Faith and have it. Infants, on the contrary, have Baptism as the only ordinary means by which they are able to receive faith.⁶

C. F. W. Walther (Nineteenth Century)

Walther's *Pastoral Theology* notes that the reality of the sacrament does not depend on whether or not it is consecrated and administered by a pastor. Nevertheless, according to God's will, it should never be consecrated and administered by a layperson. He explains:

Starting with Luther, the vast majority of our theologians maintain that the Holy Supper *should never be administered* privately by a person not holding the public preaching office or by a so-called *layman*—partly because, unlike with Baptism or Absolution, there cannot be an *emergency* regarding Holy Communion which would justify straying from God's order (1 Cor. 4:1; Rom. 10:15; Heb. 5:4); partly because the Holy Supper “is a *manifest confession* and should thus have manifest ministers”; partly because *divisions* can easily be caused by such private [acts of] Communion.⁷

C.F.W. Walther's systematic theology textbook states that only “ordinary ministers” are permitted to administer the Lord's Supper, since it is not necessary for salvation.

In a case of emergency, a layman, too—even a woman—can administer Baptism. . . . But this is *outside of what is ordinary*. Hence, regarding the Holy Supper (its necessity is not the same), it is also not permissible for anyone besides the ordinary minister to administer it.⁸

This textbook also explains that the minister of the church is the “ministerial cause” of the Eucharist, that is, the instrument through whom God chooses to administer the Lord's Supper.

The *ministerial cause*^a [of the Holy Supper] is the *ordinary minister* of the Church, who consecrates the external elements and distributes them to the communicants.

⁶ *Isagoge in Libros Ecclesiarum Lutheranorum Symbolicos* (Leipzig, 1675), 423.

⁷ Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, ed. David W. Loy, trans. Christian C. Tiews (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 206.

⁸ “*Baptismum* quidem in casu necessitatis etiam laicus aut femina administrare potest. . . . Sed hoc *extraordinarium* est. Unde *nec s. coenam*, cujus non eadem est necessitas, alii, quam ministro ordinario administrare licet.” Johann Wilhelm Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae, Adjectis Notis Amplioribus*, ed. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, vol. 3 (in Urbe Sancti Ludovici: Ex Officina Synodi Missouriensis Lutheranae [Luth. Concordia-Verlag], 1879), 705.

a) That is, that [cause] which, by the authority of another (superior), puts the sacrament in use.⁹

My colleague William Weinrich reminded us of Walther's teaching:

Historically, Lutheranism has answered the question of whether or not a layman should exercise the duties of the Office of the Public Ministry with a definite "No." The biblical basis for this answer included 1 Cor. 4:1 and Eph. 4:11. The basis in the Lutheran Confessions is AC XIV: "Nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call." When C. F. W. Walther observed that "in the case of the Lord's Supper no genuine case of emergency can arise" and so "almost all orthodox Lutheran theologians declare that no layman should administer holy communion," he was simply reflecting the common opinion of Lutheran exegetical and dogmatic tradition.¹⁰

Benjamin T. G. Mayes

The Third Homily on the Holy Pascha by Basil of Seleucia

Early Christian paschal homilies are a largely ignored source for theological reflection on the meaning of Easter. However, as a resource for homiletic imagery, linguistic vitality (at times virtuosity!), and rhetorical strategies, ancient paschal homilies provide a rich mine of materials.

In an earlier submission, I presented a translation of a homily attributed to Pseudo-Chrysostom.¹¹ The short homily translated below is another wonderful example of such a homily (that is, an Easter homily). The Greek text for this translation is the critical text provided by Michel Aubineau.¹² In the notes, I have

⁹ "Causa ministerialis" est minister ecclesiae ordinarius, qui elementa externa consecrat et communicantibus distribuit.

"a) Seu quae auctoritate alterius, velut superioris, sacramentum in usu constituit." Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, 3:494.

¹⁰ William C. Weinrich, "Should a Layman Discharge the Duties of the Holy Ministry?," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68, nos. 3–4 (2004): 212–213; C. F. W. Walther, *The Congregation's Right to Choose Its Pastor*, ed. Wilbert Rosin, trans. Fred Kramer (Fort Wayne, Ind.: The Office of Development, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1987), 107.

¹¹ William C. Weinrich, "A Homily: On the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ—Attributed to Pseudo-Chrysostom," *CTQ* 85, no. 1 (2021): 83–88.

¹² Michel Aubineau, *Hésychius de Jérusalem, Basile de Séleucie, Jean de Béryte, Pseudo-Chrysostom, Léonce de Constantinople: Homélie Pascales (cinq homélie inédites)*, Sources Crétiennes 187 [hereafter SC] (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1972), 169–277 (Greek text, 206–214).