

# Step Up to the Altar: Thinking about the Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper

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One of the singular delights of studying theology is the depth and breadth of the subject. Name a subject, that is, a *locus*—any will do—and the possibilities of exploration and discussion are endless. This is the case because theology is not (as we well know, but seem sometimes to forget) a series of discrete articles strung together by convention or long tradition. Augustine did not write theology, neither did Melancthon or Pieper; each merely explicated and articulated what was already there. Theology is in fact, nothing more than God's reality, his truth. It is a simple unity, and one pulls it loose into component parts only at the risk of sacrificing the whole truth. So, it matters little which door one chooses to enter into the exploration; sooner or later every topic comes into focus and every *locus* is relevant. All this serves, I suppose, both as warning and justification for what follows. While it might seem that I have lost my way, or wandered into avenues irrelevant for the present discussion, hopefully the connections will eventually be evident and convincing to all. The avenue by which we are to embark on this theological contemplation is the Lord's Supper, specifically the "theology and practice" of the same. The topic is a welcome one, and the invitation has satisfied my growing desire to lend some thoughts to the lively debate that continues to thrive in our midst.<sup>1</sup>

## I. Who Should be Communing at Our Altar?

It would seem that there is little to debate about our theology and practice. Everything is laid out beautifully in the Small Catechism<sup>2</sup>:

What is the Sacrament of the Altar? Answer: It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ himself for us Christians to eat and drink.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally a paper given at the Minnesota South District Theological Conference on September 29, 2007. My thanks to Charles Arand for his helpful criticism of an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 362. All translations from *The Book of Concord* below are from this edition.

How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing? Answer: Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." These words when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, "forgiveness of sins."

Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily? Answer: Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words "for you" require truly believing hearts.

That is it. Everything we need is right there. Luther gives us what we need to know about the Sacrament. *Satis est*. It is enough. Or is it? Well, that depends. Did Luther provide the sufficient and complete answer for the Christian contemplating her right reception of Holy Communion? Absolutely. It is an issue of faith; simple trust in the promise of Christ and thirst for forgiveness makes one a worthy recipient. Period. Luther accomplished his purpose: he provided instruction for the simple believer. But, do Luther's beautifully wrought words provide the sufficient and complete answer for the congregation or the pastor seeking understanding about who should commune at the altar entrusted to them? Certainly not. That is another question altogether. In the first instance the question being addressed is, "Am I worthy to be at the altar receiving the Sacrament?" The second situation, however, asks a different question entirely: "Who should be communing at our altar?" Luther's explanation in the Small Catechism provides part—but not all—of the answer to that question.

To reach a faithful and responsible answer to the second question requires a careful consideration of a few more areas of theology. It is not merely a matter of prompting people honestly to ascertain their state of repentance and their understanding of the miracle of Christ's presence in the Sacrament. Actually, it would be cause for some hope if all of our Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) congregations consistently made a serious effort to do this much. Still, if that is as far as we go in our practice of the Lord's Supper, then we are guilty of misrepresenting the full significance of the Sacrament's communion, guilty of misleading people into an incorrect understanding of unity in confession, and guilty of failing to exercise the role of "steward of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1). No, to be a faithful steward of the profound mystery that is the Sacrament of the Altar, one must take into account more than the sacramental understanding of those at the rail. The "real presence" litmus test is inadequate. To put it bluntly: Not every communicant worthy by the

standards of the Small Catechism is necessarily a Christian brother who should be communing at your altar.

This way of framing the question, it should be evident, is in full agreement with the position developed in the 1999 document from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), *Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching*.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the ready availability of this important document, and heartily commending its study and the avid appropriation of its argument and conclusions, the present study will endeavor to avoid redundancy by considering at least two attendant areas of theological interest not exhaustively treated in this CTCR document: first, a failure to appreciate the responsibility of oversight, and, second, a misapplication of "law and gospel." These topics, which will comprise the bulk of this study, are not chosen randomly or arbitrarily, but grow out of a need to address questions that continue to swarm around the communion practices of individual congregations in the LCMS.

These areas of further exploration both grow directly out of a common concern: The fact that, in spite of the oft-repeated LCMS position embracing and encouraging the practice of closed communion, surveys as well as anecdotal evidence indicate that a substantial number of LCMS congregations disagree. While it may be that there are only a handful of pastors and congregations that are willing openly and vocally to question the LCMS position on closed communion, the number of congregations and pastors that are actually practicing what may be best described as "functionally open communion" is quite significant. Clearly, a definition of functionally open communion is in order. A church's communion practice is functionally open when the determination of who is an appropriate recipient (and not merely a "worthy" recipient) is left exclusively in the hands of the individual contemplating eating and drinking, and when the church's concern is limited to an individual's worthiness without further consideration of that person's confession.<sup>4</sup> In other words, professed agreement with the idea of closed communion is irrelevant, if actual practice leaves it up to individuals to determine whether they should commune.

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<sup>3</sup> A Report of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2000), <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/admisup.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> This distinction is helpfully explained and applied in *Admission to the Lord's Supper*, 41–48.

## II. The Pastor as Steward of the Mysteries of God

The simple solution to the problem of functionally open communion is to reassert and reaffirm the role of the congregation and especially its pastor in overseeing the celebration of the Sacrament. This means that one of the primary contributing forces behind many congregations' practice of functionally open communion is in reality a denigration of the Office of the Pastoral Ministry—often perpetrated by the pastors themselves. The pertinent *sedes doctrinae* are 1 Corinthians 4:1: "Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God," and Acts 20:28: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with his own blood." As one would expect, the Lutheran Confessions reinforce the role of pastor as God's chosen means of administering the sacraments. Article V of the Augsburg Confession actually binds the article of justification to the Office of Preaching: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments" (CA V, 1). Furthermore, Article XVIII makes it clear that, while there is much bishops should not do (running a government or leading an army, for instance), it is their responsibility to administer God's grace: "Our people teach as follows. According to the gospel the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments" (CA XVIII, 5-6).

As bishop or overseer of the church in a given place, it is the responsibility of the pastor to provide for his flock and insure that the gospel and sacraments are being delivered rightly. As with the faithful prophets of Israel, the pastor does not operate on his own initiative or even according to his own preferences or ideas. He is God's spokesman and must take the task of administration and oversight seriously. When he delivers the host to a communicant, he should be quite confident that the one receiving this gift of the gospel is receiving it rightly: in faith and in the confession of the truth. He cannot freely pass out the goods without a thought to those who are receiving as if their actual presence proves the legitimacy of their reception. Contrary to much popular thought, the Sacrament is not just between Jesus and the individual. The pastor is not an insensible spiritual vending machine without responsibility for those who are receiving. The Sacrament is Christ's presence, his gift to the church; and the church celebrates this gift in the unity of their confession. It is the celebration of that gathering of people. The pastor oversees this celebration and takes care that it is being shared by those who belong to that unity. This is his task. This is what it means to be pastor. To do less is

to shirk the responsibility of the office. To push onto the visitor the decision about whether to commune is to abdicate his pastoral responsibility.

To refine a point in this argument, I am saying that reliance on an announcement in the bulletin that the Sacrament is for those who are baptized, repentant, and “believe in the real presence” is completely inadequate. Such a practice clearly amounts to nothing but functionally open communion. The practice of relying on bulletin announcements places the decision entirely in the hands of the individual. This practice makes it obvious to the church visitor that it is his choice whether to commune – which of course, is precisely the way that just about everybody wants it to be. In a society that celebrates the individual, dismisses the role of community, and operates with an entitlement mentality, giving the decision to the individual is reasonable and easy. It is a common thought: “Let each person decide. It is between the visitor and God, I’m just delivering the gospel, just passing out hosts.” Wrong. The pastor is the steward. It is his responsibility to invite people to the rail, to exclude those who should not commune, and yes, even to refuse to commune those who may present themselves at the altar inappropriately. This is neither easy nor fun. Practicing oversight and administering the Sacrament can be altogether uncomfortable and demanding. The pastor would do well, then, to recall those prophets of old who frequently found themselves carrying out distasteful and unpopular tasks not by their choosing or according to their preferences, but at the behest of the Lord whose call they had been compelled to answer. So it is with the Lord’s servants in the twenty-first century, or so it should be.

To accomplish such a shift in the practice of the Lord’s Supper will require a corresponding shift in the way that pastors and people view the office. Yes, pastors are there to proclaim the gospel, to dispense the forgiveness of sins, and to comfort souls. But, it is patently obvious in Scripture and Confessions that they are also “there” to use the keys: to convict sinners, exclude the unrepentant, and oversee the right practice of the sacraments. Functionally open communion amounts to pastoral neglect. The corrective is not pastors as dictators, but pastors as responsible stewards diligently administering God’s means of grace so that the broken are healed and the unrepentant are admonished. As stewards, they will also see that the Lord’s Supper, the meal that feeds and binds the church to Christ and to one another in the unity of their confession, is celebrated by those for whom it is intended: the members of the church in that place. Those who are not part of that particular community of faith, but who are present at the celebration of the Sacrament should learn to see

their participation as privilege and not as right or entitlement. They should assume that this celebration does not include them unless they are specifically invited to join—hence the time-honored, but now typically disregarded, practice of conversing with the pastor before the celebration. To make the point sharper yet, assuming such a conversation occurs, it is imperative that the pastor does not perpetuate the erroneous notion that if the visitor “believes in Jesus and the real presence,” then she is welcome. There is much more to it than that, and the pastor needs to communicate this fact by his conversation and his decision . . . and it is *his* decision. He has been entrusted with this responsibility by his Lord and the priesthood in that place. He is accountable for his practice in administering the Sacrament.

While such sacristy conversations are rarely fit settings for detailed discussions about the doctrine of the church, sacraments, and fellowship, it is a place to establish a relationship with visitors who are inquiring about their participation in the Sacrament. Those who are not in fellowship with the congregation should be told that the congregation eagerly desires their participation and would be delighted to welcome them when it is clear that there is unity in confession. Clearly, such a response will demand additional conversation, but if the proper tone is set, this need not be automatically negative and offensive. Admittedly, individuals steeped in American, democratic culture will frequently struggle with such an “exclusionary” position. The best pastoral practice is certainly demanded in such situations. It bears remembering that the church is, by Christ’s own definition, exclusionary. While all are indeed welcome and urged to come to worship, only those in Christ are part of the community.

### **III. Denying the Sacrament to Christian Visitors**

Before embarking on the next major area of discussion, the misuse of the law and gospel paradigm, a quick word needs to be said about the church’s squeamishness about actually telling a real person that he is not at present welcome at the communion rail. It seems that the driving force for most twenty-first century American Christians—including those in LCMS pews—is the need to be nice. So, most LCMS people who take 1 Corinthians 11 seriously recognize the need to keep people who do not “discern Christ’s body” away from the rail. These nice Lutherans see the need to reserve the Sacrament for those who are worthy in the Small Catechism sense of worthiness. It is done for the sake of the uninformed or unbelieving visitor. Letting an unbeliever commune to his own condemnation is definitely not being nice.

These same people for the same reason, however, may chafe at the thought of denying the Sacrament to a Christian visitor who believes in the “real presence,” but just happens to be a Methodist or a member of the ELCA. Telling such nice people “no” to the Sacrament is not nice and therefore deemed unnecessary or even unchristian. The steward of God’s mysteries needs to educate his people about the importance of the Sacrament on many planes and particularly needs to emphasize the corporate and confessional aspects of the Sacrament that are present along with the individual’s communion with Christ. Ultimately, the goal is to adjust the church’s culture so that nice people are able to recognize that a person should not expect to commune at any and every altar at which he happens to be present. Guests do not impose on their hosts or simply anticipate being treated like those who are part of the community where they are present. Oddly, people seem quite capable of accepting this fact in many areas. Guests at country clubs, business events, and military ceremonies recognize and accept that some aspects of these occasions are only for those who are part of that community. This distinction is understood even within the life of the church. For instance, a visitor present at a baptismal service certainly would not think it appropriate to bring his own child immediately to the font so that he could also participate in the activities of the community, nor would the pastor or those sitting near the guest, encourage him to do so. By necessity, such a process of reeducation will progress slowly and sensitively, but where faithful stewards are heeding their Lord’s call, it should begin.

A pastor acting as a steward of the mysteries of God is a *sine qua non* for an acceptable practice of the Sacrament. Both pastors and people, however, too often diminish and trivialize such stewardship to counting cups or hosts to insure that there will be no embarrassing shortages during the distribution. On the other hand, stewardship may be equated with finding creative ways to “speed up” the sacramental liturgy and distribution so that it can be done more efficiently and within the confines of the sacred 60-minute-rule; this is deemed necessary to satisfy the needs of the hypothetical visitor who is, it sometimes seems, the unwitting and unappreciative center of the entire worship event. Stewardship that is marked by a serious effort to elevate the Sacrament’s significance and to guard its distribution only to those who are part of the community of the faith in that place is difficult. But the difficulty is not merely the hard reality of strained relationships or the threat of being thought a bully or close-minded and intolerant. No, what makes such faithful stewardship extremely difficult, if not altogether rare, is that in addition to personal preferences, relationship demands, and social pressure, theology is involved. The reasoning and arguing of many who resist or completely

reject the practice of closed communion is based on more than feelings or fear; it is an issue of theology. In fact, some would insist that good Lutheran theology actually demands the practice of open communion. The argument is that Christ's gospel is available to all and the steward's job is to deliver it to all. Certainly, such reasoning should apply to the Lord's Supper. Thus, we arrive at what I believe to be the very heart of the issue that provokes such passionate and acrimonious debate about appropriate communion practices in our churches. The central problem plaguing unity in understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper is a misunderstanding and misuse of the law and gospel paradigm.

#### **IV. The Misuse of the Law and Gospel Paradigm**

Lutherans who have been steeped in a heavy atmosphere of "grace alone" and "the gospel must predominate" have been conditioned to be wary of anything that smells or even remotely feels like law. If it is law, it has to be bad. Obviously, establishing and adhering to criteria about who may and who may not attend the Lord's Supper has more than a little whiff of the law about it. The aversion to such legalistic ideas is compounded in the case of the Lord's Supper by the fact that the Sacrament is a God-given means of grace. It is pure gospel: the delivery of Christ's blood-bought forgiveness for unworthy, undeserving, and unassuming sinners who come to the rail with empty hands and broken hearts. To defile the sacred gospel with the filthy law is unconscionable. So, it is that those who advocate a more open practice of the Lord's Supper are often perceived as those who take the high road and who more fully understand and value the reality of the gospel. Of course, by implication, those who insist on a closed communion practice are therefore either still benighted or more horribly simply arrogant Pharisees who love tradition and "doctrine" more than people and the gospel. Consequently, if one is going to make a case for closed communion as the right practice of faithful stewards who love their Lord, their flock, and the lost, then one must address this apparent conflict between law and gospel.

Clearly, we have now broached an area of theology more critical, more sweeping, and more fundamental than even the doctrine of the Office of the Ministry. A thorough treatment of the problem of the polarization of law and gospel and the often-devastating consequences of such a polarization for God's people lies well beyond the confines of this study. Still, since this topic is essential to a right understanding of our practice of the Lord's Supper, a brief introduction is in order. The crucial contribution to this discussion came in 1993 when David Yeago, an ELCA theologian,



published his seminal article, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology."<sup>5</sup> In this essay, Yeago argued convincingly that today's Protestant church is perilously infected with insidious forms of the 'isms' identified in his title. Their pervasive yet often unrecognized presence within Protestantism he traces to a misconstrual of the polarity between law and gospel. Yeago argues that when law and gospel are set against one another, the gospel inevitably gains its definition in antithesis to the law itself. The gospel becomes our liberator not from our failure to keep the law and the consequent just wrath of God; rather it becomes our liberator from the law per se. Hence, any word that comes to a Christian as command, direction, or guidance, is ruled out by the liberating gospel. "If the law/gospel distinction is a final antithesis," Yeago argues, "then *any* call for one ordering of life rather than another, will by definition be the law from which the gospel frees us."<sup>6</sup>

In this theological climate, antinomianism thrives. "Indeed," Yeago charges, "much twentieth century Protestant theology has been antinomian all along; the practical antinomianism now regnant in many churches is simply a long-standing theoretical antinomianism achieving the courage of its convictions."<sup>7</sup> Yeago's accusation of gnosticism derives from the same thesis of a misconstrual of the law and gospel dichotomy, but that discussion must be deferred. Yeago has no patience for the practices in ordinary church life which derive from the antinomian and gnostic theology rampant among Lutherans. He laments the "contemporary tender-minded rhetoric about all those 'hurting people' who need more than anything else to be liberated from all order and absolved of all expectations by the redemptive 'inclusivity' of the antinomian church."<sup>8</sup> Yeago also denounces the effects on worship, education, and ethics as congregations increasingly jettison extensive catechesis and ritual/liturgical observances in favor of formats deemed less "demanding," more contemporary, and presumably more "meaningful." Yeago's incisive analysis has been reaffirmed by a number

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<sup>5</sup> David S. Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 1 (1993): 37-49.

<sup>6</sup> Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology," 42 (emphasis in original). Once freed from the law, it should be noted, people are at liberty to choose whatever pleases them and to take their cues about acceptable behavior from the culture or from whatever other source is convenient or comfortable.

<sup>7</sup> Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology," 42.

<sup>8</sup> Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology," 42.

of other theologians including Robert Benne,<sup>9</sup> Reinhard Hütter,<sup>10</sup> and Gilbert Meilaender.<sup>11</sup> The lesson is clear and disconcerting: law and gospel cannot be made the final paradigm on which to hang all theological reflection and practice.

Scholars have offered various solutions to the problem of the misuse of the distinction of law and gospel and its misconstrual as a polarity. I will present what is, I am fully persuaded, the best way to solve the dilemma, the way followed by the Reformers: the understanding of the two kinds of righteousness. Essentially, the two kinds of righteousness is the recognition that individuals live in two distinct realms: one before God and the other before the world. Before God, human beings are always totally dependent and passive, simply receiving the grace that God delivers in Christ through the means. Before God, the Christian is unconcerned about his own works, recognizing that only Christ's work matters. In the realm of this world, however, Christian people live as responsible creatures obligated to fulfill certain tasks for the sake of the neighbor who depends on that faithful service. In this realm, the Christian is active and is quite concerned about the quality and quantity of his works.<sup>12</sup> The significance of shifting from a paradigm of law and gospel to one based on the two kinds of righteousness is profound, especially for the way that one thinks about the Christian's life of obedience and the place and necessity of good works.

It is essential to recognize that a congregation's practice of the Lord's Supper is shaped by both kinds of righteousness. Certainly, the reception of the Sacrament is God's delivery of the gospel par excellence. This is passive righteousness before God in all of its glorious, inexplicable grace. However, the Christian's righteousness before the world, that is before other men, also comes into play. Here, it is important to remember that the congregation and its pastor are held responsible for the right practice of the Lords' Supper; for the sake of their fellow creatures, they must take care that the Sacrament is being properly celebrated and received. Thus,

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Benne, "Lutheran Ethics," in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 11-30, esp. 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> Reinhard Hütter, "The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics," in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 31-69, esp. 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, "Reclaiming the Quest for Holiness," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13 (1999): 483-492, esp. 488.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the two kinds of righteousness one may begin by consulting Charles P. Arand and Joel Biermann. "Why the Two Kinds of Righteousness?" *Concordia Journal* 33 (2007): 116-135.

the congregation that correctly understands the Lord's Supper as God's gift and as its celebration of unity with God and with one another will establish guidelines and directions for the right celebration that will uphold and teach the truth about the Sacrament. In other words, a conscientious and serious practice of closed communion is not antithetical to the gospel, but actually necessary and supportive of the gospel and its gracious delivery.

A pastor acting as steward of God's mysteries is acting for the sake of the gospel, his flock, and the worship visitor when he practices closed communion. All will benefit when God's will for the Sacrament is followed. Of course, this truth is more than a little counter-intuitive. While not everyone may cheerfully recognize or appreciate the value of such a faithful and careful communion practice, God's revealed will is always to be followed, even when the immediate results appear less than encouraging or satisfactory. The situation is not so different than that of pastoral ministry to a cohabitating couple. One could argue that the gospel must predominate, and that any attempt to apply the corrective of the law will only result in alienation and estrangement of the couple. Thus, the "gospel-oriented" pastor would overlook the breach of God's law (i.e., God's will!) and proceed with some more "loving" plan of action. Such behavior, of course, would amount to nothing but bare-faced antinomianism, with all of its sometimes distant—but always disastrous—consequences. When God's will is thwarted, God's creation always suffers. Gospel motives do not redeem a sinful choice. Moreover, one cannot help wondering whether fear is not as great a motivator in such situations as one's professed love for the gospel. The same question applies with equal force to the present discussion about right communion practice. It is perhaps more than a little convenient that acting in the name of the gospel also happens to be the easy route of least resistance and least offense. Claiming the gospel as a cloak for cowardice and laziness is still, in the end, just run of the mill antinomianism and disobedience.

### **V. The Abuse of Pastoral Discretion**

Finally, a few brief words must be addressed to the problems of autonomy and the abuse of pastoral discretion. While congregational autonomy may be ensconced in the documents and the hearts of the LCMS, it has deleterious effects in the life of Christ's church when claimed as a right. Both pastors and congregations need to recognize and cherish the interdependence and unity that exists between them and all other pastors and congregations. A congregation is never acting on its own. Whatever it does or fails to do has an impact on every other gathering of Christ's church—even if that impact is not directly or immediately

experienced by any of those involved. No man and no congregation has the right to "do his own thing" regardless of other pastors and congregations. We are bound to one another and must not ignore one another in our desire to walk faithfully in the ways of our Lord. If nothing else, circuits and districts serve as stubborn reminders of our mutuality and responsibility for one another. There is no place for the Lone Ranger, and there is no place for shunning or disdainning the brother or brothers who appear to be out of step in our walking together as a synod.

Pastoral discretion, then, is to be upheld and guarded as in the best practice of pastoral care. It is not, however, to be abused as an excuse for inaction or reluctance to deal forthrightly with a potentially difficult situation. Neither is a claim of "pastoral discretion" an acceptable justification for blatant and persistent disregard for the express position of the LCMS and its agreed practice. A congregation with functionally open communion is not exercising pastoral discretion. That congregation is being inconsiderate of her sister congregations, disloyal to the will of the synod, and—above all—disobedient to the will of God. Cases of pastoral discretion should be rare and the cause of much careful thought and conversation among brother pastors. Recourse to pastoral discretion should never become the norm for a congregation's communion practice. On the other hand, it is also vital to reiterate that cases of pastoral discretion do exist. When a pastor makes a decision which is clearly an exception to the normal practice of closed communion, he should expect and welcome the questions and concern of his brother pastors, but he should also expect their trust and willingness to cast his actions in the best possible light. We must be willing to allow one another freely to practice the stewardship of our shared Office of the Holy Ministry without fear of needless criticism or reprisal. Obviously, such mutual trust is cultivated when all involved act with a spirit of cooperation and an awareness of our mutual interdependence and shared life in Christ.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The nature of this topic is that much needs to be considered and said, and much is at stake. The theology and practice of Holy Communion is a topic laden with serious doctrinal questions and concerns, but that does not make it impractical or irrelevant to the life of the church; that much is hopefully clear by now. Indeed, if this study has succeeded in some small way in persuading even one reader of the serious importance of right doctrine for right practice, then its purpose has been accomplished. The church's doctrine has everything to do with the church's vitality and the church's faithfulness. We dare not forget this truth in our consideration of the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper.