

# The Pastor's Self-Communion

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When this paper was first assigned it was the essayist's belief, shared by many of his brethren, no doubt, that there was relatively little material bearing directly upon the subject. That belief has been justified by the research carried out. For the most part, when the matter of the pastor's self-communion was mentioned at all, it was dealt with cursorily, usually with an apparent assumption either that it was so obviously proper that there was no need to defend it, or else that it was so patently improper that it needed no elaborate refutation. In some cases, e.g. Reed's *The Lutheran Liturgy*,<sup>1a</sup> the discussion was developed along lines that seemed of little merit. The only article openly entitled "Self-Communion by the Pastor" that was located was in the *Concordia Theological Monthly* for October, 1943, containing a report by the Rev. Prof. H. Hamann of Australia, on a report adopted by the South Australian District Pastoral Conference. In view of the "clearness, precision, and completeness"<sup>i</sup> of this report, I have taken the liberty of using its statements as the theses for the present paper.

1. There is nothing in Holy Scriptures to prevent the pastor from communing with his congregation; on the contrary, it is most reasonable to assume that the "elders" and "bishops" in apostolic times joined in Holy Communion with their flock.

The Scriptures themselves are, indeed, entirely silent on the matter. In the institution, it is not indicated whether the Savior himself ate and drank after the Words of Institution or not, though it is "a widely held and very old opinion both among Catholics and Protestants that self-communion was an apostolic custom, and indeed our Lord's own example as He instituted the "Sacrament"<sup>ii</sup> in any case, that was a totally unique situation, which would not bear directly on the matter at hand. In 1 Corinthians where St. Paul speaks of the Sacrament, he deals with the matter of worthy and unworthy reception and the reverent administration of the Supper, but provides no indication as to whether or how the officiant received along with the congregation.

In the early accounts of the services of the church, a similar silence is to be noted. Justin Martyr (+165 ca.) in his *First Apology* (ca. 155) makes no mention either for or against self-communion by the clergy in his description of the church's service<sup>iii</sup>; neither does Hippolytus in his *Apostolic Tradition*<sup>iv</sup> at the close of the second century. At the time of Cyprian, who was martyred in 258, "the celebrant received the elements first, after him the other clergy, then the laity, first the men and then the women."<sup>v</sup>

In evaluating this meager evidence, two points ought to be kept in mind: 1) The evidence of the New Testament, Justin Martyr and Hippolytus is the testimony of silence. From the New Testament we can glean only the roughest outlines of the worship forms of the apostolic church: there is simply no interest in recording precise forms. Justin's purpose likewise was not "leading his readers through the labyrinth of liturgies but, rather to disclose the general nature of the divine service and to offset persistent rumors that the Christian cultus as a dark assembly of seditious and fanatical men who engaged in orgies and cannibalistic feasts."<sup>vi</sup> In such writing, whether the "president" received the Sacrament was a side issue. Hippolytus' concern, as evidenced by the title of his work, was to preserve the traditional usage in the face of innovations<sup>vii</sup> he, too, might well pass over anything on which general agreement could be presupposed. Thus this evidence suggests only that the matter was not in controversy, rather than indicating what the actual practice of the church was. 2) Although Cyprian's explicit mention of the celebrant's self-communion is comparatively late, it should be remembered that Cyprian was a determined traditionalist whatever his shortcomings, a lust for novelty was not among them.<sup>7a</sup> From that standpoint, it is reasonable to assume that the use he refers to was customary already when he wrote, and had been for some time previous.

2. The greatest theologians of the Lutheran Church, from Luther down, have declared self-communion by the pastor to be permissible in case of necessity, i.e., when the pastor's isolated situation deprived him of the blessings of the Holy Communion except at long intervals.

The writer is well aware that from Cyprian in the 3rd century to Luther in the 16th is a considerable leap. That leap is made wittingly. In the intervening centuries the idea of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice grew increasingly strong, and with that the abuse of the priest's private mass and self-communion apart from the people. With the Reformation, the Holy Communion was restored to its proper place as a sacrament of the whole church rather than a private sacrifice of the priest and the private masses were abolished. Although the Middle Ages have an important place in the history of the doctrine and practice of the Lord's Supper, this paper will not enter into it.

In "*An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg*" (1523) Luther writes, "VI. Then, while the Agnus Dei is sung, let him (the celebrant) communicate, first himself and then the people."<sup>viii</sup> Again, "The bishop should also be free to decide on the order in which he will receive and administer both species. He may choose to bless both bread and wine before he takes the bread. Or else he may, between the blessing of the bread and of the wine, give the bread both to himself and to as many as desire it, then bless the wine and administer it to all."<sup>ix</sup> The German text of the Augsburg Confession in Article XXIV says:

*Diweil nun die Messe nicht ein Opfer ist...sondern soll eine Kommunion sein da der Priester und andere das Sakrament empfangen fuer sich.*<sup>x</sup>

It will thus be noted that Luther does not merely permit the celebrant to communicate himself in cases of necessity, but assumes it as the normal order of things, as does the Augsburg Confession. Chemnitz also judges it proper if "the minister who communicates others also himself eats of that bread and drinks of that cup."<sup>xi</sup> Walther cites Gerhard, Carpzov, Brachman and Quenstedt as at least allowing self-communion "if no other pastor can be found."<sup>xii</sup>

It was only at a later date, beginning the close of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that objections to self-communion begin to be found in Lutheran circles. It will be noted that the dogmaticians cited above allowed the pastor to communicate himself, but did not simply assume it as Luther did. The Smalcald Articles prohibition of the priest's self-communion apart from the congregation in the *Winkelmesse* (SA, II, II, paragraphs 8-9, *Trig*, p. 465) was increasingly misunderstood as forbidding the pastor to commune himself with the congregation.<sup>12a</sup> To this was added a misplaced emphasis on the necessity of private confession and absolution before communing. Chemnitz recognized that the minister could and did include himself in the confession and absolution, and therefore might also include himself in the reception.<sup>xiii</sup> Later dogmaticians made private confession, which Luther had encouraged for those who desired it but had by no means required,<sup>xiv</sup> an absolute prerequisite to receiving the Sacrament. Since the minister could not confess to himself and then privately absolve himself, it was deduced that he also could not commune himself in the service.<sup>xv</sup> When Pietism added to this its de-emphases of the means of grace in favor of subjective considerations, and then Rationalism reduced the celebration of the Lord's Supper to an occasional, nearly irrelevant "extra," the practice of the pastor's self-communion was nearly totally abolished within Lutheranism.<sup>xvi</sup>

3. There seems to be a desire in our circles for more frequent communion on the part of the pastor than on the few occasions provided by pastoral conferences and synodical meetings. There are many good reasons why this should be recommended, and there is no sound reason why it should be discouraged.

In the second thesis reference was made to "long intervals." In the era when most of our congregations offered the Lord's Supper only four or so times per year, the Communion services at conferences and conventions offered the pastor as many, if not more, opportunities to commune as were extended to his parishioners. Now, however, the Sacrament is typically celebrated at least monthly in our circles, and in some cases more frequently. Since we have come to regard it as desirable for other Christians to have the opportunity to receive the Lord's Supper more frequently it is reasonable to ask if it is not also desirable for the pastor, who

is likewise a communicant member of the congregation, to receive the Supper more frequently. It was, in fact, just this consideration that prompted the discussions in our conference, which led to the request for a paper on the subject. As a reflection of this desire to commune more frequently, some brethren made the request that a communion service be held in connection with Winkel in order to afford more frequent opportunities for the pastors to commune. Although the suggestion met with some support initially, including that of the present writer, the counsel prevailed to have the matter treated more thoroughly. The essayist confesses that he is glad to have had that wiser counsel and the opportunity of preparing the requested paper.

The practice of such private communion services for the clergy and/or their families arose during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to meet the pastors' desire to receive the Lord's Super. It was during this time that the pastor's self-communion was discouraged or flatly forbidden, contrary to the statements of Luther's and the Confessions. It became customary in some areas for pastors and their families to meet for a special communion service followed by feasting at the parsonage,<sup>xvii</sup> a practice similar to present Winkel communions. There can be no doubt that the practice arose directly out of the denial of the right of the celebrant to commune himself.<sup>xviii</sup> Nonetheless the practice then, and it would appear also now, was of dubious wisdom. For one thing, it too closely resembled the abuses that St. Paul was constrained to rebuke in 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, 33-34, where the practice of combining the Sacrament with an evening's feasting quickly led to improprieties. Likewise, the practice does indeed bear a certain resemblance to the private masses which the Scriptures and the Confessions condemn.<sup>xix</sup> It is noteworthy that in a somewhat similar case Luther forbade private or separate communion services for certain groups. In 1553 a group of Hungarian students at the University of Wittenberg requested that a private communion service be conducted for them in Latin, since they were unable to understand the German service. Luther in an evangelical but firm way denied their request, saying that "they ought never separate themselves from the church, for it would be much safer for their consciences and less offensive to the church if they would take the sacrament in the public fellowship."<sup>xx</sup>

It would appear to the present writer that while the desire for more frequent communion by the clergy is most certainly to be commended, and in no way discouraged, multiplying such special communion services is not the solution. We do not encourage the other members of our congregations to commune apart from the rest of the membership. In case of necessity we privately commune those unable to attend the public services of the congregation, but we certainly would discountenance the practice of communing privately those who were reasonably able to attend the regular worship simply to meet their convenience or fastidiousness. Likewise, the connection between Winkel-communion and *Winkelmesse* appears rather too close for complete peace of mind. Luther writes, "For just as it is absurd for a minister to make a fool of himself and publicly preach the Word where no one hears or to harangue himself in an empty room or under the open sky, so it is equally nonsensical if the ministers prepare and embellish the Lord's Supper, which belongs to all, without having guests to eat and drink it, so that they who ought to minister to others, eat and drink it by themselves alone at an empty table and in a vacant room."<sup>xxi</sup> In particular the essayist would make bold the question the entire propriety of the present practice in our conference where the service at delegate conferences is a "mini-mass" consisting essentially of the confession and absolution, consecration and distribution, without any preaching of the Word. Inasmuch as observation would seem to bear out that few of the laymen actually commune at these services, and there is no preaching of any sort, it might be asked if we do not unwittingly approach the private mass of the priests. Though the present writer was not called upon to make any recommendations to the conference, he would offer the suggestion that this particular service should either be expanded to a full communion service with a sermon of else omitted entirely as of marginal utility and questionable legitimacy. The same would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the question of Winkel communion services. There are better ways of providing for the ministers of Christ to receive his Sacrament.

4. Another way of meeting the difficulty is to let the congregation appoint one of its members (one of the deacons, or elders) to administer the sacred elements to the pastor. This method must certainly be left open (be permitted) if the pastor and congregation prefer it.

In earlier times when it was relatively more common for churches to have more than one pastor, or for the pastor to be assisted by called deacons, these ministers generally assisted with the distribution of the Supper to the congregation, and naturally also often then administered the Sacrament to the pastor.<sup>xxii</sup> In our present circumstance, where only one congregation of the conference has two pastors, this solution is not directly applicable, but certainly there can be no objection to the congregation appointing some other person to communicate the pastor. Profs. Schuetze and Habeck suggest that one of the lay members of the congregation or a male teacher in congregations conducting a Christian day school be chosen for this service.<sup>xxiii</sup> The only requirement would appear to be that for the sake of decency the person(s) chosen to perform this office should be called by the voters' assembly to serve in what is, finally, a form of the ministry. This particular way of meeting the difficulty also resolves the questions which might arise either in the minds of the members of the church or in the pastor's own mind about the propriety of the pastor communing himself, although as we have seen this would be a matter of individual conscience rather than of doctrine, since there is no doctrinal reason why the pastor should not commune himself. In the congregation, which the writer serves, the elders have communed the pastor for some time, the practice having been begun by a previous pastor. There appear to have been no difficulties or objections.

Two other points seem worthy of mention, however. The first is the possibility of some misgivings about a layman administering the Sacrament. In this case the answer no doubt is instruction, including also the fact that when a layman is called by the congregation to perform such service, he is acting under a call as real, though less formal and less inclusive, as the pastor's. The second question regards the willingness and ability of the laymen chosen for this service. Again, to speak from the writer's experience, of three elders presently serving, one has become quite accustomed to performing this service and appears to do so with ease; a second will fulfill his responsibility if the first-mentioned individual is not present, albeit with rather evident nervousness; while a third usually "makes himself scarce" at the appointed time. If the individual is too obviously nervous performing this service, the pastor's attention is all too readily diverted from the reception of the Savior's body and blood to a nerve-wracking concern that a jittery elder will forget the distribution formula, drop the chalice or otherwise cause disaster.

5. If, as a result of a favorable vote by the conference, self-communion of the pastor be introduced in our congregations, it is perhaps desirable that some degree of uniformity be aimed at. Two ways suggest themselves: a. that the pastor takes the bread and wine before he dispenses them to the congregation. b. that he takes the elements after all other communicants have received them. In both cases no dispensing words need be used, but the pastor may well add the prayer: "May the body of the Lord Jesus Christ, and His precious blood, strengthen me and keep me in true faith to life everlasting. Amen." Perhaps the second way is to be preferred, because it corresponds more closely to the methods now in use when two pastors officiate.

Though the situation in Australia is unknown to the present writer, it is evident that among us action by the conference is not a necessary prerequisite to begin the practice of self-communion in our congregations. Nevertheless, it would appear desirable also in our circumstances that "some degree of uniformity be aimed at" simply to discourage a proliferation of mutually differing practices. In the following discussion, for the sake of brevity, when reference is made to the pastor communing himself the reader is asked to understand this as applying also to the pastor receiving the Sacrament from another individual chosen by the congregation.

a. That the pastor commune before the rest of the congregation is the order suggested by Luther<sup>xxiv</sup> and which had been observed earlier at the time of Cyprian<sup>xxv</sup>. In such a case, as Luther directs, the celebrant would take the elements during the singing of the Agnus Dei. One practical merit of such a procedure is that it would avoid lengthening the service, since the time while the Agnus Dei is being sung is typically not used for anything else. Even where the communicants begin to approach the altar during the Agnus Dei, sufficient time would appear to remain for the pastor to commune himself.

b. As indicated above, the second practice, that the pastor commune himself after the remainder of the congregation adheres more closely to the present practice where two pastors are present. Why and when the change was made to place the pastor's communion after the congregation's is unknown to this author. This would result in lengthening the service somewhat.

If the present writer were to be asked for an opinion about which method is to be preferred, he would indicate that the best method appears to be for the pastor to communicate during the singing of the Agnus Dei. This is the historical use, as has been indicated above. It also avoids the difficulties that can arise from having a layman commune the pastor and requires no lengthening of the service. Indeed, it would probably be the most inconspicuous method, since the pastor would simply take the elements as he stood at the altar. It will also be freely admitted that the writer has not followed his own counsel, as previously indicated. The practical conditions in each congregation will have to be surveyed by the pastor so that he can make an intelligent decision in the matter.

In any case, if the celebrant takes the elements with his own hand, he may pray as indicated in the thesis above. If someone else is appointed to give the Sacrament to the pastor, he would naturally speak the usual formula of distribution.

6. In congregations where self-communion or reception of the Sacrament at the hands of an elder has not so far been practiced, the pastor must, of course, discuss the matter with the congregation and give the necessary instructions before the innovation is introduced.

It is to be hoped that there would be few, if any, in our congregations who would object in principle to the pastor receiving the Lord's Supper more frequently, and it is debatable how much consideration they would be entitled to. There are, however, many weak Christians who could misunderstand or simply utterly fail to comprehend the reason for the introduction of such a change. The essayist was reminded in the course of preparing this paper that as a youngster shortly after his confirmation he had wondered when, how and even if his pastor received the Lord's Supper; others no doubt have had the same question. In such cases it is reasonable to assume that proper instruction will help people to understand that the pastor, also, feels the need for the blessings of the Lord's Supper and desires to receive it at the same altar at which the other members of the church commune.

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#### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1a</sup> Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, v.1947), p. 372-373.
- <sup>i</sup> J.T.M., "Self-Communion by the Pastor," *CTM*, 14:732-733, October, 1943.
- <sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Matthew Frusti. "The Practice of Extra congregational Communion in the Light of History and Scripture", (A Research report submitted in Partial Requirement of the Requirements for the Master of Divinity Degree: unpublished dissertation: Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, 1980), p. 15.
- <sup>iii</sup> Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Cleveland and New York: Collins, 1962) p. 8-9.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22-23
- <sup>v</sup> Reed, op. cit., p. 34-35.
- <sup>vi</sup> Thompson, op cit., p. 3-4.
- <sup>vii</sup> ., p. 15=16.
- <sup>7a</sup> Philip Schaff. *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II ( Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., c. 1910), p. 150.
- <sup>viii</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c. 1965), p. 29.
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- <sup>x</sup> F Bente, ed., *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 66.
- <sup>xi</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 328.
- <sup>xii</sup> C. F. W. Walther, *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1906), p. 198-200.
- <sup>12a</sup> Frusti, op. cit., p 59.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Reed op. cit., p. 372
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 53, p. 34.
- <sup>xv</sup> Frusti op cit., p. 59.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Reed op cit., p. 372.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Frusti, op. cit., p. 60.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61 Cf. Also S. A. II,II Par, 8-9, *Trig.*, p 465.
- <sup>xx</sup> *Luther's Works*, Vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c. 1967), p. 311 No. 4020.
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Luther's Works*. Vol. 53; p. 32.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Chemnitz, op. cit., p. 328.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Armin W. Schuetze and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, c. 1974), p. 84.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> *Luther's Works*, vol. 53, p. 29-30.

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<sup>xxv</sup> Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 372.