**Women Distributing the Lord’s Supper**

May 11th, 2010 Post by [Klemet Preus](http://steadfastlutherans.org/?author=17)

A couple of weeks ago I had a conversation with a young woman who wondered whether it was proper or godly for a Christian to receive communion from the hands of a woman. She wondered whether there are any specific passages in the Bible which say that women may not distribute the sacrament. She did not want to participate in the sins of another.

It occurred to me that this young woman is probably not the only one to have asked such questions or to be confronted with a circumstance in which a choice was necessary regarding whether or not to commune. The issue is also timely given comments recently made in the Reporter where a person at a recent conference expressed “disappoint (ment) that not all Synod congregations allow or encourage laywomen to serve as fully as laymen.” [[footnote 1](http://www.lcms.org/pages/rpage.asp?NavID=16902)] The Reporter quoted these comments approvingly. Since most congregations use lay men to help distribute the sacrament but not lay women such comments by an official journal of the synod can be understood as an attempt to change our synod’s traditional and long held practice of reserving the job of distributing the sacrament to men.

The position of the synod is ambiguous, vague and tenuous. But a task force appointed by president Kieschnick in the aftermath of the 2004 convention to interpret a resolution of that convention (3-08a) said that:

In LCMS congregations, elders historically “work closely with the pastor in his divinely assigned responsibility to feed the whole congregation with the Word of God and to watch over it for the sake of its spiritual welfare.” In such situations, the report says, “women may not serve in this office.”

And, “To avoid confusion regarding the office of the public ministry and to avoid giving offense to the church, only lay men assist in distributing the elements in the Lord’s Supper.” [[footnote 2](http://www.lcms.org/pages/rpage.asp?NavID=7208)]

For the Reporter to quote someone favorably who advocates a position contrary to the public teachings of the church is troublesome for it gives the impression that these matters are open questions. Further, there are overtures to the upcoming synodical convention which ask the synod to speak to this issue (Overture 3-28). These overtures are based on the premise that due process was not followed as the synod adopted Resolution 3-08a in 2004.

While all this synodical/political stuff is of interest, it seems to me that some good theological horse sense might also be applied. So let me offer some counsel.

Of course there are no passages which say, “Thou shalt not have women help distribute the sacrament.” But that is not really the issue. After all, the Bible also never says, “Thou shalt not take thy neighbor’s wife out to dinner on Valentine’s Day, give her roses and hold hands with her.” But I think we could all agree that other more pointed statements in the Bible would speak against this behavior. Your wife might not like it either.

There are passages in the Bible which say that women should not speak in church ([I Corinthians 14:33b-38](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/I%20Corinthians%2014.33b-38)) and that women should not teach or exercise authority over men ([I Timothy 2:11-15](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/I%20Timothy%202.11-15)). These passages have been applied for 1900 years by virtually all church bodies (except extremists groups such as early 20th Century Pentecostals or a third century sect called the Montanists or by today’s mainline Liberal Protestant denominations) to preclude women from holding the pastoral office, from being ordained and from carrying out those responsibilities which belong to the office of pastor. These New Testament commands are based upon the Old Testament and refer both to the order of God’s creation and to the roles Adam and Eve played when mankind fell into sin as reasons why women may not serve as pastors, speak or teach in church.

Recently many church bodies have authorized the ordination of women into the pastoral office. Such an action clearly goes against both the Bible and against the tradition of the church for almost 2 millennia.

But what if someone would say, “But for a woman distribute the Lord’s Supper is not wrong because it is not speaking, (‘Speak’ in this context means to address the assembly), and it is not exercising authority and it is not teaching. God gave women to men specifically to help them and helping distribute the sacrament is nothing more or less than helping with a job around the church just like setting up the altar or singing in the choir or teaching Sunday School.”

I even heard someone argue in this way: Suppose that you took the consecrated bread and wine and place them on a table and had people take the bread as they passed by. The table then would be “distributing” the body and blood. No one would consider that the table was usurping the authority of the pastor. So if a woman would stand holding the tray of little wine glasses as someone passes by and simply repeat again and again, “This is the blood of Christ,” (functioning much like a table) why would they be usurping the authority of the pastor? And if such a “distribution agent” moved from communicant to communicant during the process why would that change anything? That’s what people do who help distribute the sacrament.

To such arguments and assertions the following responses could be made.

1. No matter how many silly little situations you invent, people still know that distributing the elements in the service is the pastor’s job. If it is be delegated to someone else then it should not be delegated to those who are not and cannot be qualified to hold the office of pastor. This would also include tables.

2. The issue is not really one of who should help whom and in what context. It is a question of whether the church should set her own agenda or accept the agenda of the world. Can anyone really believe that the recent move to have women distribute the sacrament (or read the lessons in the church for that matter) is completely unrelated to society’s desire that all distinctions between the sexes be downplayed or even dismissed? One reason why people want to have women read or distribute the sacrament is because this will make our church look less offensive to the world which wants women to have all the same privileges and opportunities as men. But, we must never give the impression that we are accepting the agenda of the world.

3. Those church bodies like the LCMS which want to go by the Bible have a special responsibility towards those churches which go against the Bible by blurring the distinctions between the sexes. We must communicate, both by what we say and by our church practices, that the Bible still applies to our lives today. Especially the women of the church need to say, “Even if it were not a sin to distribute the sacrament (and we do not concede that it is not), we do not want to give anyone the impression that those churches are doing right which ordain women or otherwise disregard God’s intentions for men and women. We must not do anything which gives the impression that we agree with women’s ordination or women preaching.”

4. If there is some doubt then we should be especially cautious. We apply this basic principle to other matters of Christian morals. If you are in doubt whether saying something is against the eighth commandment or not then stay quiet. If you wonder whether a specific action might be viewed as disrespecting your parents or a person in authority then don’t do it. If you think that your actions toward another woman (or man) might be interpreted as sexual in nature then don’t do them. So we don’t buy flowers and hold hands with other men’s wives. If you wonder whether a specific word is profane or inappropriate then don’t use it. If there is any doubt about women distributing the sacrament then don’t do it. Christians do not conduct their lives so as to get away with as much as possible. They conduct their lives carefully so as never to give the impression of indifference towards a command of God. This applies to God’s word about the role of women in the Divine Service.

5. For 2000 years our custom of pastors or specially appointed men distributing the sacrament has remained unchanged. While the Bible is the final norm of our theology we certainly cannot dismiss 2000 years of church tradition without some serious discussion on the matter. When the first Lutherans were discussing the various practices of their church they insisted that, “there is nothing [in our confession] that varies from the Scriptures, or from the church universal or from the Church of Rome, as known from its writers.” [[AC XXI 5](http://bocl.org?AC+XXI+5) footnote 3] Lutherans have always maintained the importance of changing nothing in our worship patterns unless the word of God requires it. Certainly no one would say that the Bible demands women to distribute the sacrament. Lacking such a command we are well advised to remain with our tradition.

Someone may say that the LCMS passed a resolution in 2004 which allowed women to distribute the sacrament. To this we give two responses.

1. A resolution of the LCMS does not establish truth. It reflects truth perhaps and it may also go against the truth. But no resolution of the synod can be used as authoritative if it goes against the Bible.

2. The 2004 resolution was vague since it did not specifically say that women could distribute the sacrament but only that women may carry do those tasks in the church which are not assigned to the pastor. It specifically did not state what tasks are to be assigned to the pastor. A commission subsequently formed by president Kieschnick said that to avoid confusion “only lay men assist in distributing the elements in the Lord’s Supper.” But, I must also hastily concede, presidentially appointed commissions have neither theological nor ecclesiastical authority in our synod.

So, it is contrary to the scriptures and to the historic practice of the church and of our church for women to distribute the sacrament because this is clearly the pastor’s responsibility. Further the practice of women distributing the sacrament gives a very unclear confession at precisely the time when a clear confession is called for. And it could easily give the impression that our church is indifferent to the word and will of God.

The question I was asked is whether you should commune as a visitor of a congregation at which a woman is distributing the Sacrament. Here my counsel would be consistent with the reasons why the practice is wrong. Simply do not participate in the practice of another church or congregation which goes contrary to historic Evangelical practice, is of doubtful moral value and goes against the Bible.