

I would like to thank Prof. Biermann for his excellent paper. I hope that he will continue to write and speak on this topic because I believe he has much to offer the synod in what has often been a divisive issue.

While the entire presentation is very good there are three important things that stand out in the paper and a couple of clarifications I would offer.

The first item that stands out is the use of the term “functionally open communion”. He offers a clear definition.

“A church’s communion practice is functionally open when the determination of 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.”

I call this “check off” communion. If you can check all the boxes on the communion card you may commune. All of these vary but the statements with which you must agree go something like this.

Have you been baptized?

Do you believe Jesus died for the forgiveness of your sins?

Do you believe in the real presence of Christ body and blood in the sacrament?

Even if asking these or any other questions you can up with were all that was required (and the paper clearly points out they are not) I would have to ask the question “Is the person answering the question qualified to answer?”

If there were a group of Baptist or Pentecostals in front of me and I asked the question “Do you believe Jesus is really present in communion?” almost all of the hands would go up and in the case of the Pentecostals probably two hands. They would not be deceitful in doing so. They would do so with integrity from their perspective. When we say “real presence” they do not know what we are talking about. So even if your communion card has the best set of questions ever devised that covers all the necessary topics it is impossible to believe that the person in the pew is going to be qualified to determine if they meet those standards or not. No matter how you look at it admitting a person to the sacrament on the basis of questions or agreement to a statement on a communion card is hopelessly flawed and ought to be completely abandoned.

In his paper Prof. Biermann states the following:

“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.”

While I would not disagree with this I do not believe that this is the limit of the individual’s responsibility when deciding to receive the Lord’s Supper. I fear we often wrongly teach our own people that the only thing they need to worry about in deciding to go to the sacrament is their own worthiness which is simply faith and trust in the promises of Christ. In addition to asking if I am worthy to receive the sacrament the individual must also ask another question. “Should I commune at this altar?” or “Can I rightly bind myself to the people who commune here in a common confession of faith?” Someone may object and ask “Well, if it is important why didn’t Luther mention it in the small catechism?” The reason is that it was not an issue when and to whom Luther writes the small catechism. The primary audience is the family under the guidance of the Father as its head. It is written in a context that assumes the hearers are all part of the same confession. Prof. Biermann addresses the issue of who should be at the altar from the

perspective of the church or the pastor when he asks the question "Who should be communing at our altar?" This is also an issue to be looked at from the viewpoint of the individual.

When Luther decides not to commune at Marburg does he do so on the basis that he is not worthy or well prepared? **No**, he will not commune because he determines that he is not of one confession with what is taught by Zwingli and others. His decision not to commune was a confession of faith to the heterodox that they were wrong in their confession.

Partly because the main disagreement between Zwingli and Luther was over the real presence Lutherans have tended to focus on that issue when it comes to fellowship. Rome believed in the real presence as did Canterbury to a certain extent. Would Luther commune with them? It is clear that as Luther would not commune at Marburg he would not commune in Geneva, Rome, Canterbury or anywhere else where the Word of God was not rightly confessed.

Prof Biermann correctly states:

"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."

There is a corollary that applies to the individual so that when a person communes at an altar from which false teaching is preached. Even if the real presence is taught he sins against the body and blood of Christ and everyone else at that altar regardless of his own worthiness to receive the sacrament by partaking in that communion. If I go to an ELCA church and commune there I may be worthy to receive the sacrament but my participation there is sinful because I have proclaimed to everyone there and to the world that their confession of faith, seen in what they do and teach, is God pleasing when it is not.

Another important point of the paper is Prof. Biermann's description of a misuse of the law/gospel paradigm. When I read his statement that "law and gospel cannot be made the final paradigm on which to hang all theological reflection and practice" I broke out in a cold. I ran to my book shelf, grabbed Walther's Law and Gospel, held it like a security blanket and sucked my theological thumb. Being thus comforted I dared to read on.

Prof. Biermann's description of two kinds of righteousness as it applies to the Lord's Supper is very interesting. This seems to me to be parallel with my understanding of the two activities that happen in the Lord's Supper. The first, the vertical action, is the part of the sacrament where Biermann would describe us as "totally dependent and passive, simply receiving the grace that God delivers in Christ through the means." The second, the horizontal action, is where we talk about the fellowship of the church and the confession of faith we offer in the sacrament. Here the second kind of righteousness would apply that is described as where "people live as responsible creatures obligated to fulfill certain tasks for the sake of the neighbor who depends on their faithful service. In this realm, the Christian is active and is quite concerned about the quality and quantity of his works." The second kind of righteousness or the horizontal dimension in the sacrament is often forgotten. Prof. Biermann's two kinds of righteousness would also seem to correspond to the traditional Lutheran distinction between justification and sanctification.

After reading Prof. Biermann's paper the second time through I was able to relax my grasp on Walther's Law and Gospel at least enough so that the blood could flow into my fingers once again. The kind of Gospel reductionism that Prof. Biermann warns us about was of course never advocated by Walther nor clearly would he have tolerate it for a moment.

We often fail to treat the Lord's Supper as a corporate act of the church and instead treat it as and individual action. We should say "we commune" not "I commune". Individuals are baptized.

Churches commune. Luther found the practice of a private mass to be abhorrent. There is no such thing as private or individual communion. When we take the body and blood of our Lord to the sick and shut in we take them the communion of the church. We are intentionally including them in the body of Christ, his church, even though they are physically separated from it. While the first action of the sacrament, sometimes called the vertical action, has God coming to us with forgiveness the second part is the horizontal action of the common confession of faith "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). This proclamation is made to each other and to the world.

As pointed out in the paper it is the responsibility of the pastor to administer the sacrament. This is another part of the paper that I believe really stands out, a clear discussion on what it means to administer the sacrament. In the installation service the pastor is asked "Do you promise that you will perform the duties of your office in accordance with these Confessions and that all your preaching and teaching and your administration of the Sacraments will be in conformity with Holy Scripture and with these Confessions?" Paul writes to the church in Corinth "Let a person thus regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries; here finally it is sought among stewards that one be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:1-2). Stewardship is not a right. It is a responsibility as we saw in last week's Gospel lesson which was the parable of the dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-15). The faithfulness of the steward's actions were not a matter of indifference. He had his stewardship taken away from him. As the master calls the steward to give an account of his stewardship so God calls all pastors to give an account of their stewardship of the mysteries of God.

Suppose your congregation was endowed by some generous person with ten million dollars and you were given the responsibility to be the administrator of the fund and to invest it wisely. To carry out that responsibility you put an ad in the paper that asked three questions;

1. "Do you know how to invest?"
2. Can you make our church a lot of money?"
3. Would you like to invest money on behalf of our church?"

It then went on to say "If you can answer yes to all three of these questions please send us a stamped self addressed envelope and we will return to you a check in the amount of one million dollars to invest on our behalf." You might get lucky and get a few people worthy to invest on behalf of you congregation. The chances are very good that not all of them would do well by the congregation. I suspect that your stewardship of that fund would be quickly taken away. You may have had the best of intentions but you did not carry out your duty in a responsible way. In the mysteries of God we of course have something far more precious to administer than money. We administer forgiveness and the eternal life it brings. To carry it out requires much more than a checked box on a communion card.

Some will object that because their church is too large or because they are new to their parish that it is impossible to judge who should come to the communion rail. This is where the issue of membership becomes important. An individual may not have a Lutheran understanding of the real presence but most can understand if they are a member of the local congregation, or sister LCMS congregation or not. We then assume that the individual has made a public confession of faith consistent with the truth of scripture.

Others will object that membership does not tell you anything about the faith of the individual. After all, aren't people suppose to examine themselves? Only they can know if they have faith. I would agree with all of that. I as a pastor cannot know the faith in anyone's heart. It is not my responsibility to do so. In what Prof. Biermann describes as a first kind of righteousness or others will call the vertical action of the sacrament the pastor makes no judgment. Admission or refusal to admit to the sacrament is not based on the faith in the heart of the believer. The stewardship decision of the pastor takes place in the second kind of righteousness or the horizontal action of

the sacrament, the good work of professing the truth of God's Word. Here the pastor is given the responsibility to judge the public confession of the individual.

If I welcome someone into the communion fellowship of the congregation who does faithfully confess the true faith I have sinned against God and that individual by confirming his false belief. In addition to that I have also sinned against the fellowship. I have attacked the unity of the church. If I allow an unrepentant practicing homosexual to commune in my congregation it is not just a matter between the individual, God and me. It is a matter for the entire congregation because I have declared by his admission to the sacrament that he is one with the congregation. God will certainly hold me accountable and the members of the congregation should also because they have been yoked to him. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 6:14 "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? In the same way when I go to another church I must recognize that to participate in Communion there is not just an issue of receiving God's grace. It is also a public confession that I am one with the confession of that congregation.

How is a lay person to know if he should commune at an altar? A well trained lay person will know that Rome does not teach justification by faith alone; that the Baptist teach that Christ is only symbolically present in the sacrament and that baptism is an act of the individual instead of God and we could go on and on. The poorly instructed or new Christian may not know a lot of these things that I assume everyone in this room readily knows. It sometimes becomes difficult for even the regular member to see the differences between the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).

It is the responsibility of the shepherd, the pastor, to teach his flock so they may avoid making a false confession. The first way to teach our people not to commune at a church that has a false confession is to deny communion to those from those heterodox churches when they come to our altars for communion. If David's Methodist Aunt Tilly from Frozen Turnip, North Dakota comes to my church and decides to commune because she can check all the boxes on the communion card it is more likely that when David visits Frozen Turnip that he will free to commune at her Methodist church. However, if his pastor has gently told Aunt Tilly that while we are always glad to see her but because she confesses what the Methodist teach we cannot allow her to commune David will have been taught by his pastor that there is a significant difference between our two churches and will be far less likely to commune when he visits Frozen Turnip.

We simply need to teach our lay people not to commune in any other church that is not a member of the LCMS or a church body with which we are not in fellowship. That requires no special theological training. Any person is qualified to figure that out with minimal instruction. It is a quantifiable fact.

Membership is not some secret handshake that you have to know to get in. Membership ought to bear witness that the person has made a public confession of faith in accordance with what we teach. Those who are not members should be examined by the one given the stewardship of the Mysteries of God, the pastor. Prof. Biermann rightly points out that this has to be more than an examination of the individual's understanding of the real presence and the fact that he believes in Jesus.

In the broader context of the synod we accept someone who has membership in another congregation as having made a public confession of faith consistent with the truth of scripture. Synod means "walking together." We must have confidence that the confession being made at our sister congregations is consistent with our own. If that confidence does not exist the fellowship, the walking together, of the synod breaks down. Prof. Biermann says;

"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 experienced. 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.”

It is the issue of fellowship that makes all of us accountable to one another. If I am teaching in my congregation something that is contrary to the word of God it is not just an internal issue of the congregation. It is an attack upon the fellowship of our synod. Because of the communion fellowship that exists among us my brother pastors have the responsibility to confront me about it. First, they must be concerned for their own members who might commune in my congregation and about members of my congregation who might commune in theirs. Secondly, because the walking together that we have in the synod we are joined together in the second kind of righteousness to the world around us. We all suffer when those outside of our fellowship who claim the name Lutheran allow practicing gay clergy to remain on their role because the world often does not see the distinction between the synods. How much worse it is when someone who actually is in our fellowship violates the word of God and engages in practices that we have agreed we will not do.

In describing the position of David Yeago Prof. Biermann says;

“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.

I find this to be a condemnation. I examine my own preaching upon which I pride my distinction of law and gospel. I fear I may be guilty of wrongly communicating to the hearers at times that they have been freed from the law. Biermann makes it clear that we have a role in that second righteousness or the horizontal action of the sacrament. God calls upon us to faithfully proclaim His death until he comes. He commands pastors to be faithful stewards of proclamation. That is God's good and gracious law. For us to fail to follow it is sin.

I stand before you today as someone who has often failed to live up to God's expectations concerning the Lord's Supper. As a college student I communed at a heterodox congregation because I liked the music and I falsely believed they were more loving than others. As a pastor I have had to return to my study more than once after service and ask for God's forgiveness because I wrongly carried out my stewardship of His Mysteries due to cowardice or laziness on my part. I struggle with my old Adam and I need the support of brother pastors and other brothers and sisters in Christ as I seek to carry out my responsibility to faithfully administer the Mysteries of God. To that end Prof. Biermann's paper has been very helpful to me and I am sure to all of you. Thank you for inviting me and I look forward to our discussions this afternoon as we continue our discussions on this topic.