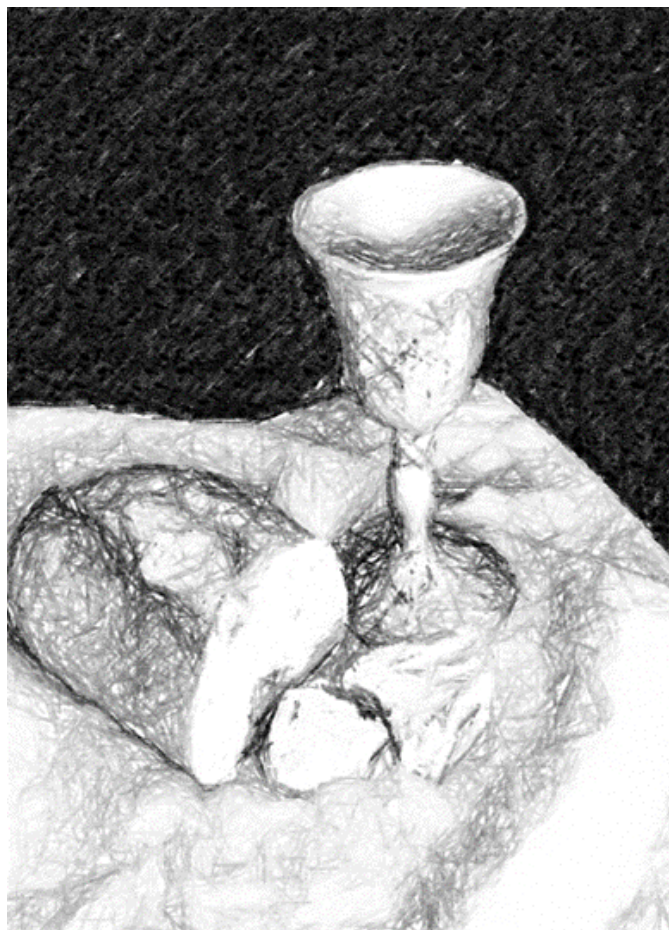


Who May Preside?

A Statement on Sacramental Authority



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Preaching is a vital part of the experience and witness of the Church. Having been asked by a District Superintendent to take over the preaching task in a local church as a lay minister; or finding yourself in the position of supply preaching by some other necessity, may create opportunity for you to ponder why you are allowed to preach but not to preside over the Sacraments of Holy Baptism or The Lord's Supper.

The Rev. John Wesley (one of the founders of Methodism) understood there to be both a preaching office and a priestly office (meaning the role of **re-presenting** Christ before the people). Preaching is a task in which both lay and ordained persons can engage. All of us receive the same baptism and some of us receive the same gifts, though we may be called to use them in different ways. Some of us have felt an interior calling to be set apart for specific leadership in the Church as pastors. The Church has understood this as a fulfillment of God's promise that God's people would always have shepherds. It has been the practice of the Church from the beginning to examine those who profess to have an **interior** calling to set-apart ministry (remember Paul being taken to Jerusalem?). This examination is for the purpose of the Church determining whether it may affirm that calling. This is often referred to as the **exterior** call. If we wish to be faithful to the historic pattern of the Church, this must happen prior to a person being authorized to set-apart (not separate) leadership for the Church in its continuance of the ministry of Jesus Christ, which includes the administration of the Sacraments (exercising the priestly office).

The Sacraments of the Church are holy mysteries which initiate us into the community of faith and nurture and form us as the people of Christ. The English word *sacrament* is derived from the Latin word *sacramentum* which was an oath that made the person giving the oath *sacer*. *Sacer* is a Latin word for holy (set-apart) or sacred (consecrated). In the western church, this Latin word was used to stand in the place of the Greek word for mystery (*mysterion*), which implies something previously unknown that has been revealed. In the mysteries of the Church are **re-presented** "the saving acts of Christ in a hidden form."¹ Hence the prayer after the giving of the elements (bread and wine) in our liturgy for the Sacrament of Holy Communion (*Word and Table: Service 1*) which reads, "Eternal God, we give you thanks for this **holy mystery** in which you have given yourself to us."² Here, mystery conveys the idea that grace is **given** to us through the real presence of Christ, though we do not know how.³

The Sacraments are God's acts of ministry to the Church; they are means of grace given for the Church not to be "gazed upon, or to be carried about; but that we should duly use them."⁴ They are to be conducted as, and during, corporate worship, according to the liturgies of the Church, and after the manner of Christ. Sacraments have been understood by the church as those acts of the church which are

instituted by Christ, are constituted by elements (water, bread, wine), and have promises attached. They are not accessories to the life of the Church, but, rather, they are normative to the life of the church.

Through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, we are initiated into Christ's Church and given new birth. Through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are joined, formed, and nurtured to be the Church, the Body of Christ. The Sacraments are the outward signs of an inward grace. The Sacraments are means of grace, ordinary channels by which God gives us grace, and the forgiveness of sins. By "grace" we do not merely mean "unmerited favor," but also the active presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives working to perfect us in love, love of God and love of neighbor. They are tokens, yes, but not in the modern slang sense of **pretending** that something, or someone, has significance. They are tokens in the true sense, as they serve as tangible representations of that which is real and present. The sacraments are not magic wrought by the presider but signs of God's continuing power and presence. They should not be seen as a mere rite of passage (in the case of Holy Baptism) or a bare memorial of Christ's death. Rather, they are a mystery through which the grace of Almighty God is conveyed to, and in, the Church.

Having a reference for what the sacraments are, and their importance to the life of the Church, we better understand the weight of the question: "who may preside?" Or, more oddly stated, "who may **represent** Christ at the font or table?" For most of the Church's existence, the presider has been a person who experienced an inner call to ministry, had that calling externally confirmed by the Church, and then was set apart by the Church itself. We call the act of setting apart *ordination*. The word *ordination* is related to the word *order*. You may remember that Paul reminded the church at Corinth that worship must have order (see 1 Corinthians 14:40). Worship is not a service to us but our act of declaring the worth-ship of God and giving our thanks and praise for God's acts of redemption. Worship is the foundational activity of the Church. Article V of "The Confession of Faith" reminds us that "under the discipline of the Holy Spirit the Church exists for the maintenance of worship, the edification of believers and the redemption of the world."⁵

The Sacrament of Holy Communion, also known as *The Lord's Supper* and *The Eucharist* (from the Greek for *give thanks*) has not been understood as just another part of worship. Rather, for a large portion of the Church's history, Eucharist **was** worship (this is why our Book of Worship titles the basic order of worship as "A Service of Word and Table"). Worship is the human act of giving thanks for who God is, what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do. Paul encourages the church to ensure that this is not chaotic. As with all human endeavors, order requires leadership. Ordination is ultimately an act of the Holy Spirit; but it is also the Church's process of ordering persons into this leadership position.

Ordination is not a gift of power; but the gift of authority, and the imposition of a task. The person set apart by the community has specific tasks within the community. In our polity, ordination is to two orders: *Elder* and *Deacon*. Both have sacramental authority. The deacon may assist the elder in administration of the Sacraments or, when authorized by the Resident Bishop, may preside. What is important to remember is this: the person who is ordained is not granted the **power** to make the sacraments meaningful or effective. Rather, they are simply given the **authority** and the task of leading the people of God in celebrating the sacraments. The efficacy of the Sacraments is guaranteed by the Blessed Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The ordained do not become magical as some may be prone to thinking. Rather, they present themselves to become Christ's slaves and are yoked to him as such. They become those who **re-present** Christ before the people.

In ordaining me, Bishop L. Jonathan Holston laid his hands upon me and said:

David Dean McManus, Jr., take authority as an elder in the Church to preach the Word of God, and to administer the Holy Sacraments.⁶

What made me eligible to administer the Holy Sacraments is the authority given to me by the Holy Spirit through the Bishop, on behalf of the whole Church. Now, you may ask "didn't the bishop ordain you?" And, the answer is yes, the bishop laid hands on me, and the bishop spoke the words that are my orders. But my ordination is the result of many hands. First, the call of Christ on my life. Second, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Third, the recognition of that call by the Church; through pastors, District Committees on Ministry, and the Board of Ordained Ministry to name a few. Prior to Bishop Holston laying hands on me, the Lay Leader of the South Carolina Annual Conference stood and reported on behalf of the laity; and an ordained elder stood and reported on behalf of the ordained elders of the Conference; that I had been summarily examined and approved to be submitted to the rite of ordination. The bishop then reported to the Conference that "those authorized by the Church"⁷ had examined me and that I had been found "to be of sound learning and of Christian character, to possess the necessary gifts and evidence of God's grace,"⁸ and that those who had examined me believed that I was "duly called to serve God in this ministry." Then, very much like a soldier, I was given my orders through the laying on of hands. There is nothing there about receiving power in a way that is not available to every other baptized believer sealed by the Holy Spirit.

One of the primary purposes of the ordination process is the protection of the sacraments. The Church has a vested interest in assuring that the saving acts of God and the real presence of Christ are being re-presented authentically and in a manner worthy of the nature of the grace of God inherent in

them. For this reason, only those who have been duly examined and duly authorized are allowed to preside. The presider is required by the Church to have been vetted regarding their understanding of the sacraments, to have been approved to receive authority to lead in their celebration, and to subsequently then be **given the authority** to preside. This is in line with our understanding that grace is received, not taken. This is why, for instance, your pastor breaks a piece from a broken loaf and **places** it in your hand.

In the polity of The United Methodist Church, there exists one notable exception to the greater Church's expectation that those who preside shall be ordained: the Licensed Local Pastor (LLP – a category of minister not found in most other denomination). I began my time in set-apart ministry as an LLP. I went through the process of revealing my interior sense of call and declaring my candidacy for ministry. I was examined and approved by my local church. I was then examined by the District Committee on Ministry in the Orangeburg District. Upon their having approved me as a certified candidate, I received nominal training in preaching, leadership, and presiding at the Licensing School. After completion of Licensing School and an affirmative the vote of the Clergy Session at the Annual Conference, I was eligible for appointment by the Resident Bishop as an LLP with the understanding that I would continue my education. We have understood that the LLP works under the sacramental authority of the District Superintendent; and so, that person is licensed with the same sacramental authority as the Ordained Elder; but only within the context of their appointment (hence the term *local pastor*), and under the DS's supervision. LLPs are persons who have been given a contextually limited authority but have the full rights and responsibilities of a pastor. Notice, I did not use the word *power*.

In our polity, only the Ordained Elder, the Ordained Deacon, and the Licensed Local Pastor are given authority to preside at the sacraments. As I said previously, the purpose of restricting this authority is to provide order and protection for the sacraments, and our sacramental practices. Ordination/Licensure creates an accountability that ensures that the sacraments are not seen as common things that may be treated as accessories to the Christian experience. Those who find that they are experiencing a sense of being seen as “less than” those who are allowed to preside at the font and table may do well to consider whether this sense of lack is a sign of being called to the licensed or ordained ministry of Word and Sacrament.



Endnotes

¹ Bromiley, G. W., (. *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 618.

² “A Service of Word and Table I” in *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship*. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 11.

³ Other tribes of the Church speak of ideas such as transubstantiation and consubstantiation. I personally like the Lutheran notion that Christ is in, with, and under the elements but I prefer that we rest in the idea of mystery and accept Jesus’ words from Luke 22:19, “This is my body” (**ΤΟΥΤΟ ΕΣΤΙΝ Τὸ σῶμά μου**) as sufficient.

⁴ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church: 2016*. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 69.

⁵ *The Book of Discipline*, 73.

⁶ “The Order for the Ordination of Elders” in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992), 678.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 673.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 673.

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