

Invalid Ministry

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The Lutheran Church of Australia has recently decided to ordain women. One of the reasons that are given for this innovation is that the validity of the sacrament is not dependent on the person administering the sacrament but is founded on the Word and promise of Christ. That claim seems to be based on Luther's teaching about infant baptism in the Large Catechism (LC 4.52-63).

But that assertion is incorrect and misleading, because in 4.52-53, 55, 60-63 Luther does not base the validity of the sacrament and its administration on the Word and promise of God but on 'God's Word and commandment' (German *Gottes Wort und Gebot*), or 'God's Word and ordinance' (German *Gottes Wort und Ordnung*). The sacrament is not valid because Jesus has promised to convey the forgiveness of sins through its faithful enactment and reception, but because he himself has established it through his Word. The text of the Large Catechism makes it quite clear that God's Word, his commandment, and his ordinance do not refer to three different things but to one and the same thing. They refer to his sanctifying word of command by which he institutes, establishes, and confirms the sacrament (LC 4. 8, 14). It is his institution of the sacrament (LC 4.6). Therefore the rationale that has been provided operates with the false antithesis in considering whether the sacrament depends on Christ's promise or the person who administers it.

But Luther does not speak about that there. He asserts that the validity of the sacrament depends on Christ's authority rather than human authority. It is based on Christ's mandate for it. In this case his command includes who is to enact it as well as what is to be done. The validity of the sacrament cannot be considered apart from whether the person who administers it has been authorized to administer it. We may therefore distinguish between 'the person' and the 'Word' of Christ, but we cannot play them off against each other

This misunderstanding comes from the confusion of validity with efficacy. But in theology, as in law, the sense of these terms hinges on a vital distinction. To put it quite simply, the concept of validity, as it is used by Luther and other theologians in the assessment of ministry, considers whether an act of ministry by a pastor is authorized by Christ or not, whereas the concept of efficacy considers whether its administration delivers what Christ intends it to give. Validity is important for the certainty of faith that rests on the sure foundation of God's Word and results in a good conscience; efficacy is concerned with the benefits that are promised by God in his Word and received through faith in it.

Let me illustrate this difference with a secular legal example. A marriage is valid if it is performed by an authorized marriage celebrant in accordance with the law. It is efficacious if the married couple keep the promise of lifelong commitment, faithfulness and love that they made in their vows. In that case the legal validity of the marriage does depend on the person who performs the ceremony as well as the law on marriage.

In the Lutheran church and its theology the concept of validity is used as a liturgical term. Its use considers whether what is done in the divine service has been instituted by Christ and whether it is done as he has commanded. So, for example, a baptism is valid if it is done with water in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is invalid if it is done with water in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier. The validity of someone's ministry has to do with the authority of the minister. It considers whether the minister has been authorized by Christ's word to preach his gospel and administer his sacrament. Thus the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope rightly maintains that the ministry of the New Testament is 'not valid because of the authority of the person but because of the Word given by Christ' (Tr26). That Word is the word by which Christ institutes and empowers the office of ministry.

So then, the validity of someone's ministry depends on its authorization by Christ's mandate for it, the mandate that is carried out by the faithful performance of the divine service in a congregation by someone who has been called to serve there as Christ's agent and representative. That ministry is valid if it is done by an authorized person in an authorized way for its authorized purpose.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper would therefore be invalid if it was performed by an unauthorized person, such as a layperson, a self-appointed pastor, or a woman. Thus as early as the end of the first century AD Ignatius uses this criterion to discount the performance of the divine service by a congregation apart from its pastor. In his Letter to the Magnesians, 4, he declares: "Such people do not seem to me to act in a good conscience because they do not meet validly in accordance with the mandate." The celebration of the Lord's Supper would also be invalid if it were performed in the wrong way, such as with chips and water rather than bread and wine, or without the words of institution, or without the distribution and reception of Christ's body and blood.

Why, then, is it so important to distinguish the validity from the efficacy of the Lord's Supper? The issue of validity is not governed by a legalist obsession with correct procedure but a pastoral concern for a good conscience. For us as Lutherans that is central to our understanding of the sacrament, because it was instituted by Christ 'to awaken faith and comfort our consciences' (AC 24. 30). For us the institution of the sacrament by Christ, faith, and a good conscience belong together. But how? The answer is given most simply by this general statement in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXIV. 70: 'God is pleased only with services instituted by his Word and done in faith' (Apol XXVII, 70; see also Apol XV.14, 17). The Word of Christ, the commandment by which he institutes it, provides us with the sure foundation for our faith in it and its blessings. It gives us certainty, the certainty of a good conscience. So if we do what Christ tells us to do we can be sure that we receive what he gives to us through his most holy body and blood; we can be sure that we receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. We can be sure that God is pleased with us because we put our trust in him and obey his commandment (1 John 3:21-23). But if we were to disregard his Word and disobey him we would frustrate the purpose of the sacrament. We would deprive ourselves of a good conscience and the full assurance of faith that it provides (Heb 10:10-22). We would, most likely, come under God's judgment for our disobedience.

We would, almost certainly, open our conscience to the accusation and condemnation of the devil. We would be haunted by an uncertain conscience.

Thus the administration of the Lord's Supper by a woman is invalid, even if she has been called and ordained by the church on its own authority. Her administration of it cannot but burden the conscience of its faithful members because it contradicts the mandate of our Lord Jesus in 1 Corinthians 14:38 and his instruction about it through the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:33^b-38 and 1 Timothy 2:11-14. So since she does not have Christ's authority to be a pastor, how can they, in good conscience, receive the sacrament from her or any other woman? That would violate their conscience, because it would implicate them in a deliberate act of disobedience to Christ and the possible desecration of the sacrament. At the least, they could not but doubt whether God approved of her ministry and their compliance with it.