

CTCR Document
The Public Reading of the Scripture in the Divine Service
An Apologetic

We always create our own troubles. The Lord of the church gives His gifts to His people, and we always find a way to think of His gifts as our work rather than His giving. We can create our own troubles, but our Lord supersedes our troubles with His grace and His gifts.

The reading of the lessons of the day in the Divine Service has traditionally and ordinarily been the calling of the ordained pastor. By 'traditionally', we mean the practice that was handed down as commonplace and salutary in all times and in most places. By 'ordinarily' we mean that this has been the usual practice (though there have been and will be exceptions to usual practice) and also that this is the 'orderly' practice, or that 'according to good order' in the church.

While there have been times and places where those in the *order* of readers also read the appointed lessons other than the Gospel reading. This is because they were in training for the pastoral ministry. It was a sort of seminary fieldwork. The introduction of 'lay readers' in the Divine Service of the church is a recent innovation. In the 1970's, in particular, the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship promoted the concept of 'assisting ministers' – lay persons who were given an assisting role to the pastor of the congregation. Unfortunately, this terminology has only added to the confusion in understanding the role of pastor and people, or preacher and hearers. Perhaps, collectively, we can say that we did not think through the implications of this change when it was introduced.

First, some clarification must be made. In no way does the recommendation that pastors should be the ones to publicly read the Scriptures in the Divine Service imply that lay persons are less holy or 'not good enough' to do so. Nor do we mean to say that the Scriptures lose their power or cease to be God's Word when read by laymen. The efficacy of the Word is innate. The power of the Word is the Author of the Scripture, the One Who is the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ.

Nor is this a question of power. We do not speak in the language of 'rights' or 'rules' when we discuss who should read the Scripture publicly in the Divine Service. Those who partake in the delivery of God's gifts to His people do so as a matter of blessed privilege, not of human right. And the church has no place in setting up 'rules' when it comes to God's gift of His Word.

The focus in this regard needs to be on Christ's institution. Christ gives His Word to wound and to heal, to accuse and to forgive, to convict guilty sinners and to pronounce them innocent saints. The Word of God always has this authority. In any and every situation, God's Word will not return to Him empty, no matter who speaks it.

However, in the Divine Service, Christ gives His gifts of Word and Sacrament through His called and ordained ministers. Christ Himself established this ministry of the Gospel in order that justifying faith may be given through His chosen means. When the pastor is given by Christ to read the Word of God to God's people, it is not because the church has made a rule about the public reading of the Scripture, but because the office of pastor is also a gift to God's people. The pastor is a servant of the *Word*. This is a rich title. The pastor is a servant of Christ, the *Word* made flesh, for the sake of Christ's people. Yet he is also a servant of the *Word*, the *Scripture*. His delivery of the Word of God is the way Christ comes to His people in the Divine Service.

Perhaps it is helpful to make a general distinction between the sacramental and the sacrificial portions of the Divine Service. Typically, the pastor serves God's people in the sacramental portions: the Absolution, the Reading of the Word, the Sermon, the Lord's Supper, the Benediction. Typically also, both people and pastor together respond to God's grace in the sacrificial portions: the hymns (though hymns also proclaim), the Creeds, the Offering, the Prayers.

In this general paradigm, it may be helpful to ask where are the most appropriate roles for lay persons in the Divine Service. Those baptized into the priesthood of all believers are called to 'declare the praises of Him Who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light'. (1 Peter 2:10)

Thus prayer, praise, thanksgiving are the fitting work of the lay persons. Perhaps, for example, a lay cantor could sing the Kyrie in the Service. Or lay person(s) could offer up prayers, or lead the prayers in the litany. In these activities the priesthood of believers fulfills the calling God has given – to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving.

This may not be the place to go into the various vocations in which all Christ's people 'offer up their bodies as living sacrifice' in the home, in the community, in the workplace – all places where they speak the Word of God to all who will hear. But these are also the 'spiritual worship' of the saints of God. The questions at hand, however, deal more specifically with the Divine Service, where Christ comes to His people in Word and in Sacrament.

It is also important to add that no part of the Divine Service is 'holier' than any other. The Holy Spirit sanctifies all. The sacramental portions of the Service, wherein the pastor serves God's people in the stead of Christ, are not 'holier' than the sacrificial portions of the liturgy, where people and pastor respond to God in praise, prayer, and thanksgiving.

Addendum

One of the difficult practical questions that arises in regard to the pastor's office including the public reading of the Scripture is what to do when that office is vacant. What happens in congregations who do not have a pastor to serve in the stead of Christ because of location or other circumstance? We certainly have had many parishes in Canada where lay-led services have been common and necessary.

It would seem that in these cases, we are addressing unique and unusual (extra-ordinary, that is, outside of what is 'ordinarily' done) situations. Where these are not temporary conditions, the church's alternate means to provide one to fill the pastoral office (e.g. PATS) would come into play, so that the pastoral office would no longer be vacant. Where these are temporary conditions (e.g. a pastoral vacancy), they are simply the exception to the norm to which they will return when the office is no longer vacant.

Where a layperson is leading the Service (including the public reading of the Scriptures), he does so not to be a 'minister', but to take this leadership role in this exceptional circumstance. (No doubt, there have been times and places where such 'exceptional circumstances' have lasted for years, even decades.) Lay-led services are really an extension of family devotions. (This is why it would be more salutary if Matins or Responsive Prayer were used in such circumstances instead of a truncated Divine Service.) Just as parents take up the Scriptures to teach their families at home, so an elder, a father figure in the congregation, ensures that the Word of God does not fall silent during the vacancy.

We must acknowledge, likewise, that where congregations do have the practice of lay readers in the Divine Service, that these lay persons serve under the office of the ministry. That is, they do not take on this public reading as part of the priesthood of the baptized, or according to some perceived 'right'. The pastor in such a circumstance is to train and supervise the readers, for the responsibility for the public reading of the Scripture remains his as the servant of the Word.