Orthodoxy Orthopraxis

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1. Write a 5-page paper using the Examination of Christian Practice essay outline [Course

Resources].

2. Paper Outline

a. Begin with an introductory paragraph that has a succinct thesis statement.

b. Address the topic of the paper with critical thought.

c. End with a conclusion that reaffirms your thesis.

d. Use a minimum of eleven scholarly research sources (two books and the

remaining scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles).

**The Event for Reflection**

In the middle of 2020 as the covid pandemic was impacting communities and churches, I was asked to resign my position as Senior Pastor of a moderately large congregation in an urban setting. This came about because of the intersection of several factors that fall well into exploration through the lens of orthodoxy, orthopraxis and ultimately orthopathy. The central issue was that my core staff communicated they had lost confidence in my leadership as we had addressed a key issue impacting the worship practices of the church, specifically switching to every Sunday communion. Both associate pastors and my administrative secretary had communicated with the board of elders requesting my removal. This was a culminating experience generating much reflection and subsequent learning on my part as I examined my motivations, the behavior of others, the systemic forces in play, and ultimately why I failed in helping them navigate the issue. This issue became an intersection of principles, theological differences, disagreement about best practice, systemic and church cultural influences, personalities, toxic leadership and basically lots of very human realities.

Initially when the issue was raised by a few prominent elders with the support of the newly installed associate pastor (who for purposes of this essay we shall call Bill), I was resistant but open to the elders and pastoral staff studying the issue with a degree of anxiety. Peter Steinke identifies six key triggers that impact congregational systems. There is disruption, which is connected to change, loss, separation, innovation, or even accidents. There is feeling trapped, that is helpless or powerless, not being able to influence the outcome. There is threat, real or imagined, where base survival instincts take over. There is difference where the different is experienced as strange or contrasting. There is uncertainty dealing with doubt and unpredictability. And finally, depletion dealing with lessening, deficiency or even just exhaustion. (Steinke, 2019, pp. 18-19) As this controversy grew and became problematic, I experienced all these triggers. I had been working for four years to stabilize the congregation and was very anxious about unnecessary changes. My attitude was if it was not broken, there was no need to fix it. I had a sense of feeling trapped and powerless as the core leadership of the elders started following the lead of the associate pastor. I felt like my job might be threatened before it was expressed and my critical thinking diminished as my base instincts were activated. I was off balance because of the unpredictability of how it would work out. And my influence was being diminished as senior Pastor. Ultimately I realized I had been on the edge of burnout for a while which had tipped me over the edge, leading me to respond in a critical moment to the associate pastor imposing the practice of every Sunday communion in my absence, with two direct and simple words that probably resulted in my being asked to resign: “f… you”. Steinke suggests that leaders follow three fundamental patterns: the quick fix, the wait and see, and adaptive practice. (p. 132) I have always leaned more toward caution when adapting church culture with the wait and see approach. This did not serve me or the congregation well this time.

This was a culminating point in my ministry leading me to seek out mentoring, additional professional education in the form of learning about congregational dynamics, and resigning, taking a leave of absence to recuperate both physically and mentally. This experience led me to consider if I had the skills and abilities for ministry in the parish environment. (I had retired from military chaplaincy, and this was my first congregation after retirement.) With the guidance of mentors and my ecclesiastical supervisor, I began to explore how congregational and systemic dynamics were at play and how other people’s limitations also magnified the consequences as well as exploring my own behavior and decisions.

**Situational Dimensions**

I entered the congregation in 2015 shortly after their Senior Pastor of thirty years died from a sudden unexpected heart attack. The congregation was conservative and somewhat insular from our church bodies networks and elected to utilize a model I have never seen in my denomination. A self-selected group of four elders out of sixteen would form an executive committee to function as the administrative head in place of the Senior Pastor. They did have a vicar, a student finishing his seminary training, who would be installed as an Associate Pastor (let us call him Mary) shortly after I came in as a consulting pastor. I was recommended to them for the role of consultation to help them stabilize in the face of their grief and uncertainty. Initially I was to serve the first six months of 2015 as I was scheduled to begin full-time chaplaincy with the VA in the same city at the end of June filling the vacancy of a retiring VA chaplain. I was able to stabilize the congregation and help Marty assimilate into his new role. Shortly before the end of my contract, I was informed the congregation was interested in my remaining as the permanent Senior Pastor, which I accepted.

For the next four years my focus was on building upon the legacy of the previous pastor. The congregation had mostly functional systems and practices. We added approximately 120 people, of which two-thirds were new to the Lutheran tradition coming in through adult confirmation. Worship attendance was stable and trending slowly upwards. Giving was significant with a 1.6-million-dollar budget. The congregation was conservative in practice and beliefs and liturgical but not high church. In 2018 two big events began to shift the culture a bit more toward the conservative side. First Marty and his wife (our Director of Christian Education), who were both highly competent, efficient, and motivated accepted our district’s request to plant a church in another metro area of our region. My organist announced his retirement. In the midst of this I was approached by a neighboring minister of music (lets call him Jeff) concerning a job as tensions had arisen between him and his supervising pastor. And with him would come a 5-million-dollar organ that had been purchased by a particular group of church members in that congregation but had been rejected by their voters. My congregation would call him and accept the organ at the end of 2017 starting a shift toward being more conservative and higher church in worship practice.

In 2019 we called a new associate pastor, Bill. Bill was young and had a reputation as a convert from Judaism for effective evangelism and teaching young people the Christian faith. He had strong support from the executive committee of the elders, a former retired pastor, and two of the largest donors to our congregation. This was the first full exploration for a called position the congregation had had in that generation. Marty had been placed as an associate because he was a son of the congregation, and the former Senior Pastor had requested him. I had been called because I was in place. Jeff was called at my request. Bill was called after an examination of many candidates, which meant much more congregational involvement. This was important because it was the first time that the women of the congregation became aware they did not have the right to vote for the calling of a pastor. I was able to mitigate the potential conflict that was rising with the promise we would study the matter as a congregation. This we did from a theological and historical perspective leaning heavily on materials provided by our denomination. I lead the study, and the congregation voted to allow women the right to vote. At the voters meeting there was no dissent, and I thought we had dodged a bullet. I would learn this was not entirely the case as it caused distress among the four executive elders. Their response was to begin to insist on every Sunday communion forming an alliance with Bill who was a strong advocate for the practice. Immediately in the fall of 2019 Bill was instructed to teach the congregation by the executive four who did not consult with me on this. Bill taught but failed to convince the congregation and in January of 2020 they did not approve the practice. This brought into the congregation open division for the first time. I presented a plan to the elders to follow the same process as we had with women voting, that I would repeat the educational instruction. Following this during the easter season we would practice every Sunday communion and then following the conclusion of this season we would reconvene the Voters to allow them to make a more informed decision. However, two critical events happened. First, Covid hit, and our city shut down church services interrupting the opportunity for the education piece. Secondly, while hiking I experienced a significant injury to my left leg resulting in requiring medical leave. In my absence, Bill with the approval of the executive four imposed every Sunday communion.

Peter Steinke is an important teacher regarding congregational life and systems. He is prominent in describing churches as emotional systems. (Steinke, 2017) Steinke suggests that nothing complex or controversial will happen without confusion, even resistance, and some degree of emotional reactivity. (p. 13) He strongly tells leaders that anxiety in the congregation cannot be avoided or ignored and that how the leader addresses this anxiety will “…determine the outcome more than anything else.” (p. 13)

God has given me an analytical mind. I can exegete scripture, books, journal articles, even culture itself. Managing anxiety in congregational systems is not my strong suit. I am as one of my mentors described, conflict avoidant, something Steinke describes as “failure of nerve.” (2019, p. 62) In this situation I tried to lean into my gifts for teaching and communicating what I have learned after analyzing an issue. When this tool was removed because of my injury and I had to rely upon leadership and influence from a distance, my anxiety about conflict resulted in my reducing communication with Bill and the executive four as I adopted a defensive posture. And seeking reassurance I listened too much to Jeff the music minister who I gravitated toward as a fellow military veteran who was my age. (I would learn much later, that Jeff is most likely a strong narcissist. A year after this I would be invited to a dinner with 12 of the sixteen elders who would apologize and inform me that Jeff had been working behind the scenes telling Bill one thing, the elders one thing, myself one thing. It appeared he had been angling for my job, which he got in the end. I allowed Jeff to convince me that Bill had designs on my job rather than just a strong conviction about every Sunday communion.

Reflecting on how all this played out, the strengths and weaknesses present in me, and my team, became apparent. I have always been very loyal to my people, trying to place the needs of the people in the pew first. This was an expectation I had of my staff, that we do not impose our personal desires where Scripture is silent on matters of practice but educate about best practices and get by in. I still believe after this incident that this is the best and most respectful practice. But it does take leadership to help the staff stay on point, which is where limitations in my skills became apparent. As mentioned above, when I feel I am being resisted, I tend to withdraw and hope it will fade away, and as seen above. In this case when it did not fade away, I ultimately exploded on Bill. Because of my desire to be happy with all and to avoid conflict, I was too open to manipulation by Jeff. In the end I allowed my anxiety to get the best of me and to disrupt objective thinking. I hesitate to speak about the strengths and weakness of others as this involves looking into people’s minds. But I will share the following observations based on how I experienced key players. I experience Bill as a highly motivated idealistic pastor but inexperienced and not with strong abilities to temper his expectations and needs. Over the years I have learned the value of respecting congregational culture especially in matters of practice where Scripture allows freedom. This was not Bill’s approach. He was much more a transformationist toward what he had been taught is the proper Lutheran confessional model of worship and practice. Jeff, who had aligned with Bill to introduce chanting in worship (again without consulting me.) I had initially though was making this alliance because he preferred high church styles as a highly skilled musician. In the end I learned that he was also likely motivated by narcissistic hunger, or the need to be the center of attention and be in charge. After my departure Bill did take a call deciding he could not remain there in good conscience and Jeff convinced the executive four to convince the elders to give him the position. As for the executive four. Most of them were in my opinion far more conservative in their preferences. The head elder though, who had lots of influence with the previous pastor, was likely maneuvering to regain central influence. I had in the previous years expanded the decision making beyond him, and from his four, to the entire 16 and had encouraged the Church Council to come alongside in a leadership position, something the head elder was never supportive of.

**Operational Beliefs**

For my part, several core beliefs influenced my decisions. As a theologian and pastor, I adamantly support the principle of *sola scriptura* and the inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures. I have often said where Scripture speaks: conservation. Where Scripture is silent: responsible freedom. As stated above, in thirty years of ministry I have learned to respect congregational culture. My first ten years were in parish ministry, my second in military ministry, and my last ten once again in parish ministry. In addition, I have a respect for and suspicion of tradition. I deeply respect the value of tradition as a creation of the Christian community that links us with something that is beyond this specific time and place. But I am highly skeptical of elevating tradition alongside and certainly over Scripture. This last would become important as tradition was proclaimed to support the position of those advocating for every Sunday communion.

My respect for Scripture traces back to my youth when my father instilled in me deep respect for Scripture. It was a rite of maturity in our family to be giving a leather-bound Bible around the age of eight. Mistakes in my early ministry in seeking to impose a particular culture upon a congregation either because of personal preference or seminary education, taught me this is often counter productive and even often not needed. The military instilled in me the value of mission focus (as often it is a matter of life and death) and loyalty with respect for positional leadership around the core value of service before self.

Ironically, a key source for my beliefs about tradition and scripture stems from my seminary training. My professors were a generation of teachers brought in after a major controversy at the seminary about the inerrancy of Scripture with the previous more liberal professors leaving or fired. The issue of every Sunday communion was specifically discussed with my professors advocating for alternating Sundays so that the Sunday without, the Service of the Word, could reinforce the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture for faith and life in a culture starting to be skeptical of such. Today, our seminaries are emphasizing tradition and calling for every Sunday communion, a transition beyond the scope of this paper, but relevant to the generational difference between myself and Bill.

These beliefs have consistently led me to frame my public ministry as a teaching ministry. I believe the life of the church must be grounded in Scripture. Thus, teaching has been my go-to. I have not always expended as much effort on relationship building. This has become a stronger focus for me. Scripture is silent on many things, leaving it up to pastors and congregations to make decisions. This is a cooperative enterprise requiring a pastoral leader to have strong relationships with his people. I have learned that in this regard I need to have as much concern for my staff as I do for the people in the pew. I have also learned that personal preference can be strong in these matters and people, including pastors, including myself, can mistake preference for “thus says the Lord.” And when dealing with a congregational system, an emotional system, with multiple people with particular preferences, it can be an interesting series of interactions to try to influence and lead.

My ministry experience, and this event in particular, to realize that in end we are dependent upon God. The *solus Christus* proclamation of the Reformation extends beyond propositional Christological orthodoxy into how we ultimately experience and process life including our failures and the failures of others, and our failures together. I have come to understand that while we are called to cooperatively bring our skills and experience to bear to do ministry together, in the end if we become too focused on ourselves, we may find ourselves reminded of our dependency on Christ as our works fail.

**Critical Christian Thinking**

Christian tradition played a critical role in the controversy over moving to every Sunday communion. I began with my seminary education which stressed that communion is fine every other Sunday making room to stress the importance of God’s Word in a stand-alone service. My respect for *sola scriptura* directs me to hear Jesus’ words of institution where he says “often.” (1 Corinthians 11: 23-26) Often falls somewhere between seldom and every though arguable closer to every. But often is not “every.” I find this position supported by my church body in various public proclamations. Answering the question “how often” the LCMS responds, “No fixed number can be given in response to this question.” The LCMS advocates communion should be “…a regular and constitutive feature of the worship of the church.” At the same time the LCMS recognizes Jesus did not prescribe a specific frequency. (Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper, 1983, p. 30) This would move the issue in my opinion into the realm of adiaphora, something where there is to be responsible freedom. Our Lutheran Confessions respect tradition but recognize that much of our worship involves humanly created rituals that are not commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. They support the well-being (bene esse) of the church in its promotion of the Gospel, but do not necessarily belong to the essence of the Church (esse). (Arand, 2022, p. 310) Holy Communion falls under essence as a ritual instituted by Christ to be done often for the forgiveness of sins, which goes straight to the heart of the Gospel, the very essence of the church. But the question of how often falls under the well-being of the church, a question for responsible practice. The confessions explicitly address the issue of adiaphora recognizing some practices are not commanded nor forbidden but exist for good order and that in considering these matters all “frivolity and offense should be avoided…” (The Formula of Concord, 2006, p. 671) The same section goes onto conclude that it is improper to judge or criticize another congregation or pastor for differences of practice in matters of adiaphora. (p. 672) Thus I lean towards respecting congregational practices regarding how often they desire communion.

However, there is a growing emphasis in our Synod and on our seminary campuses, often advocated for by young pastors and a vocal segment of lay people who follow them on social media for requiring every Sunday communion. Bill my associate pointed out that the same Confessions proclaim that Lutherans are falsely accused of abolishing the mass and the confessional documents proclaim in our defense that we take Holy Communion seriously as evidenced by it practice every Sunday and on feast days during the week. (Augsburg Confession, 2006, pp. 90-91) Our Synod has begun strongly advocating for the best practice of every Sunday communion with Weiting being the most prominent spokesperson. Weiting draws on Luther who was critical of pastors who failed to celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. (2020, para. 14) He points out that descriptions of worship in the book of Acts would indicate the early Christian community practiced a version of Holy Communion whenever they gathered. And he points out our need for the forgiveness of sins when we gather together as the church on Sundays. (2019)

In the end I have not found myself 100% convinced by these theological arguments. While I am not opposed to the practice of every Sunday communion, am highly sympathetic to people who say they want or need this for their spiritual well-being, I am less influenced by those who present traditional practice as a ground for doing so. The current president of our Synod, a strong advocate for every Sunday communion, rightly points out that the LCMS subscribes to the Book of Concord because “…they are a faithful exposition of God’s Word, not merely insofar as they contain the Word of God.” (Harrison, 2024, para 2) This being the case, recognizing that the Confessions present the Lutheran practice is to do communion every Sunday in the context of Jesus using the word “often” leads one to understand this evidence to the Roman church that Lutherans are not rejecting the mass must be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, the passage explains why the mass is a serious matter by describing our practice. But this passage cannot be raised to a prescriptive place as here we know Scripture says “often” not “every” and to do so would violate our confessional subscription built on *sola scriptura.*

Cultural forces are having an impact on how this matter is approached, both micro cultures, which is congregational culture and seminary culture and larger macro cultures such as our Synodical culture and the wider western culture within which it is embedded. The LCMS, as many traditional churches, is responding to the challenges of the post-modern, post-Christian era, by doubling down upon and elevating traditional practices. Efforts in previous decades to interface with culture using contemporary worship for example, while still permissible, is reducing in frequency after a growing chorus of criticism from Synodical leadership, seminary campuses, and many districts (think diocese) within our church body.

Elevating tradition is most likely a defensive reaction to some of the central tenants of postmodernism. Gene Veith, one of our most prominent theologians and cultural exegete, is highly critical of contemporary western culture’s loss of respect for truth resulting in the deconstruction of essential elements of western civilization such as the nuclear family and marriage, now gender. “We hear there is no meaning… into the vacuum comes ‘will to power’…all there is is power over others.” (2020, p. 20) Christofides says the church must come to grips with the reality that Christianity is no longer playing a central role in shaping values or beliefs. The question of what is true has become there are many truths. (2024, p.2) He says people in the world are embracing a relativistic world view. (p. 3) In response to this many within Christendom are doubling down on what is seen as being attacked, taking strong stances on propositional truth, and returning to and finding comfort in tradition shared by an ecclesiastical community. Dreher even advocates for such an approach, the Benedict option, where instead of trying to fight the flood, the church focuses on building an ark in which to shelter utilizing tradition which he describes as “…not the worship of ashes but the preservation of fire.” (2018, p. 5, xix) Veith likewise advocates for the value of tradition. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, Veith writes. “Building a church culture, a community distinct from the world that can preserve the best of our civilization’s heritage through the new dark ages, will be challenging, to say the least, if churches have thrown out their own traditions, heritage, and creations.” (p. 357) Thus it is understandable in the midst of upheaval, discounting cultural change, and uncertainty, that the Christian community would seek to find encouragement inside the community drawing upon the strong influence of tradition to reinforce solidarity.

In the LCMS this has been playing out in recent years as a new emphasis under the umbrella of Lutheran confessionalism. Our theologians influenced by hermeneuticians such as Gadamer are recognizing the value of the community as an interpretive community expressing the meaning of Scriptural in and through traditional forms, such as the confessions generated by our Lutheran forebears 500 years ago. Thus, Voelz will argue for the value of interpreting Scripture through the lens of the creeds for example. (2009, Concerning Objectivity Section) Thiselton is known for making the connection between doctrine and interpretation (the given and the reception) as involving “…communal understanding, transmitted traditions, wisdom, commitment, and action.” (Fossett, p. 39) Thiselton says the church must admit its contingency, its situatedness finding its home in traditions and communal understanding. Yet at the same time Thiselton warns we must embrace the Scripture is other standing apart from us on its own terms. (p. 40) It is the tension of this interplay that the question of every Sunday communion is found. It cannot be denied there is strong support in history and tradition for the common practice of every Sunday communion until recent times when in the Lutheran tradition under the influence of pietism and American evangelicalism it became less frequent through remaining a regular practice. (Weiting, 2006, pp. 128-136) It also cannot be denied that Jesus said “often” not “every”.

Traditional orthodox Lutherans uphold the principle of *sola scriptura* as sole rule and norm for faith and doctrine. But we are not naive and fail to recognize the impact of tradition, reason, and experience. We strive to have Scripture in the magisterial position and tradition, reason, and experience, in the ministerial or serving position. As the question of every Sunday communion was raised in my former congregation and played out over the subsequent months, my experiences very much informed my decision making. The reality is that while we may strive to keep our experience and our emotions in ministerial position, they have influence in our decision making. As stated above, over the years I have learned to listen and learn from my congregation. How do they do things? Why? And to observe if it works to support the ministry of the Gospel here in this place. If it is working, if it is not broken, I do not seek to change it. I experienced that the worship culture at my previous congregation was working. We were one of the two conservative churches in our worship practice in the city with our other congregations still practicing a more contemporary approach. As such we grew because people would move into the city or grow disconcerted with the congregation and come to us because of our traditional worship culture. But when Bill and Jeff began to introduce high church elements, there was pushback, confusion, and I heard the criticism, this is too Roman Catholic like. For me, the main issue was why are they trying to fix what is not broken and why are they showing disrespect for the people in the pew. When I tried to communicate this one time during a pastoral staff meeting, Jeff looked at me and said Pastor “x” is dead, when will you finally bury him?” This direct criticism I interpreted to indicate having not learned the lesson of respecting culture and I interpreted it as a sign of disloyalty and disrespect for myself and my office.

In addition, my recent experience of helping the congregation to navigate the previous contentious issue of women voting lead me to believe the same approach would work with this issue.

**Theological Significance**

As this played out there was a dance between orthodoxy, orthopraxis and orthopathy. There were the foundational beliefs, the given revelation, the doxy, regarding Holy Communion as a rite and gift of Jesus Christ to of His true body and blood given for the forgiveness of sins. On this there was no disagreement. Where the differences existed, they were more in regard to practice, though Bill was adamant that the practice of every Sunday was “doctrinal”. He was extremely critical of those who do not “every.” Often the criticism is leveled that those who do not practice every Sunday communion are not true confessional Lutherans. These tensions between doxy and praxis have always existed within our Synod with some arguing for a narrow specific praxis. While my study of this issue both during and after the fact, contributed to an increased appreciation of the doctrine and practice around the Lord’s Supper, most of my personal growth occurred in the realm of orthopathy.

It is somewhat ironic that those who advocate for every Sunday communion from a tradition perspective, are also critical of pietism who is primary blamed for the predominant practice of once or twice a month in the 20th century. Lutheran orthodoxy is highly doubtful of running theology off subjective experience. Yet, there may be something for considering the pietists’ insights and why they arose in response to what they saw as the sterility of reason. Dale Brown reads the Lutheran pietists not so much as founding truth in subjectivity but rather on the subjective reception of truth, a productive receptive medium rather than producing revelation. (Olson, 2012, p. 371) The Lutheran Confessions are critical of the enthusiasts who were perceived as defining doctrine and producing doctrine by and from experience. However, the confessions themselves, and specific to the reception of Holy Communion, recognize that experience, even emotional experience, plays a role. Speaking of the medieval Roman belief in working of the sacrament as a means of grace by the outward act (*ex opere operato),* the Augsburg Confession states this would imagine we receive this gift without “a good emotion” and advocates that faith is “not an idle thought.” Orthopathy does not receive a great deal of treatment in our Synod, and when it does it is usually with suspicion. Reflecting on the matter at hand and how it played out, it occurs to me that while the issue was often verbalized in terms of doctrine and practice, the underlying force was pathos, strong emotional feelings, motivations… passion. Emotional intelligence is recognized as the ability to be aware of our own feelings and those of other people and to process our own emotions in productive ways. (Singh et al., 2023, p. 353) Many people have emotional reactions to change, often defensive emotional reactions as noted by Steinke above. Conservatives often express anxiety about change and demonstrate a resistance to change and may put in great effort to resist. (Shukla, et al, 2020) This can be especially magnified when in the presence of likeminded people. Herding occurs when the influence of the group becomes so great that personal decision making is motivated by seeking to please the group. (p. 354) This herding influence was operative in myself and those advocating for every Sunday communion. One of my primary concerns was losing members, who had already begun complaining about changes to the worship culture. I feared this would be the final limit. Bill was strongly influenced by his confessional group that he was involved in doing regular podcasts for which was very high church. And he was influenced by his recent seminary training which has moved to strong traditional influence. All of us had strong emotions driving our selection of argument about why our doctrine was correct and why our preferred practice was the best. In the end, for this instance, as important as examining the doctrinal beliefs behind communion (orthodoxy) and the historical and contemporary practice (orthopraxis) it is needful to examine the pathos and what a correct pathos (orthopathy) might have looked like. This I will consider in the final section.

As I tried to navigate this issue during its evolution, I did a great deal of Bible study and examined our Lutheran confessions. As stated above, Lutheran theology is shaped by the principle that scripture alone is the rule and norm for faith while recognizing the importance of the Lutheran Confessions as a community confession that expresses and explains what the Scripture says. And the Confessions has a great deal to say about communion, some of which has been utilized above.

After the fact upon the advice of a mentor and congregational analyst, I enrolled in professional course work regarding congregational dynamics. Peter Steinke’s insights into congregations as emotional systems became a means through which I not only digested this event but the previous 30 years of ministry. His key takeaways include seeing congregations function as interconnected emotional systems that drive interaction and decision making. He highlights the danger of anxiety in a system often triggered by change or external pressure generating potential or actual conflict. These high levels of anxiety can lead to reactivity, blame casting and polarized thinking. Leaders must recognize this so they can distance themselves from being drawn in while not disengaging. This I failed to do as I was drawn in and I sought to disengage. Instead of this, Steinke advocates for a non-anxious presence for the leader focused less on solving the problem and more guiding the people through the emotional process. His insights into triangulation, blame casting, and scapegoating were well taken and are recommended. He advocates that leaders have a strong sense of self, what he calls the differentiated self, what can maintain boundaries while remaining connected and able to engage with emotional others without being overwhelmed or losing one’s own perspective. And even though the pastor deals with present, persistent, often loud, and emotional individuals, to not lose the perspective that we are still dealing with a whole, a system rather than focusing on individuals or isolated events. When dealing with change one must thread the needle between rushing or backing down prematurely or trying to avoid it. He sees conflict as an opportunity for growth by clarifying values and deepening relationships when managed well, with the potential to hurt the system when avoiding it or addressing it poorly. Rather healthy systems will have open communication, clear roles and shared responsibility grounded in a clear mission with shared goals and faith commitments. (Steinke, 2006)

This brought me back to consider where scripture speaks to the intersection of belief, practice and feeling. In Romans chapter fourteen Paul encourages believers in the church to be accepting of people who have different beliefs about practice, in his case the eating of meat sacrificed to idols. He notes some avoid it because it offends their conscience. Others see the idol as nothing and thus eating the meat is not an issue. His main point is to avoid quarreling over disputable matters but to place the relationship as being the most important over winning an argument about something God did not think was important enough to give direction on in the scripture. In verse 19 he says our focus should be on peace and mutual care. Sadly, this atmosphere of peace and mutual care which had been existent in my former congregation, and was one of the reasons I accepted the call, became eroded as I and the other leaders of the congregation allowed our anxieties to get the best of us, doing the oppositive of what Steinke encourages.

**Contextual Application**

What I now do has evolved out of those days. First of all, I listen more and work harder to grow relationships with congregational leadership rather than assuming I can neglect this because they will sacrifice themselves for the whole.

Also, as I listened to the previous proponents of every Sunday communion I began to hear some underlying themes, likely unconscious. Some were motivated by a dogmatic confusion of doctrine, practice, and tradition. But many were expressing a heartfelt desire and need for communion every Sunday. I even began to hear, and still hear in circles where this topic is raised, the need for it to be offered daily. I suspect at the bottom of this is not a hypersensitivity to sinfulness on the part of some compared to others, a sort of spiritual elitism, nor do I suspect these people are somehow magnificently worse sinners than the typical Lutheran. Rather there is an intersection of beliefs that God’s gifts are somehow limited by time and can fade away or be superseded by sin occurring after their reception. There is the idea that if I sin on Monday after taking communion on Sunday I am in spiritual danger of condemnation because of new sin after the fact. If this is the case, how dare we wait until Sunday. Of course we need it now. In this case daily would not be often enough. Hourly, maybe… Likely we need it constantly. Fortunatelywe have. For God’s gifts are not reduced by time. Hebrews chapter nine makes this very point about the sacrificial death of Christ, that once for all people for all time was this done in contrast to the regular offerings of the priests. Luther in his small catechism when he teaches of baptism speaks of how an act that occurred early in our life is available to us daily to drown the old sinful Adam and bring forth the new. (The Smaller Catechism, 2006, pp. 466-467) Certainly we cannot out sin the gifts of God. We may reject the gifts of forgiveness given through baptism or holy communion through unbelief, but we cannot out sin the power of Christ’s atonement. I teach the gift of forgiveness cannot be invalidated by the gravity of our sin nor is it something that fades or rusts with time as do human things. Atonement completed by Jesus who is both human and divine, is yet a very divine thing, eternal not temporal, unlimited, not limited. Today I teach the ever-present gift of communion as a comfort akin to the way Luther taught regarding the ever-present gift of baptism.

On a personal note, I have worked on becoming a more differentiated self. And this has involved realizing my utmost dependence upon God. If God has things in hand, there is less need for my anxiousness. I can simply do what needs to be done. This has helped me be less reactive, to have no more “f… you” moments so to speak. Months later, as I was healing from my physical injury and from the emotional pain of being rejected by my congregation and having to face my own fallibility and the fallibility of some people, I had considered friends and family, I found myself depending on God far more. I recall one evening as I was beginning to think that I would not receive another call, that I was probably done and maybe should be done, I prayed before bed that if God thought I could still be of service, if I still had any “chops” left for ministry to send me some indication, but if He wanted me to be done to tell me. The next morning, I received notification of my current call. My goal had been to preserve my position as senior pastor in a church of people I loved against the newcomers and overbearing old-timers. But the time of rest was beneficial, and my goal today is simply to minister, take care of people. I am no longer a prominent senior pastor of a large visible congregation; I have two small town churches of faithful folks I watch over and I am thankful for it. This required having the courage to confront myself and recognize that I had not had the courage to lead from the front and the back. I had expressed a failure of nerve disengaging from my detractors and only stepping forward when I was too anxious to be reasonable. I had pandered to the noisy wheel who had lots of money. I had rescued Jeff who I considered to be a friend and brother and allowed myself to be manipulated and triangled against Bill, the executive four, others. I allowed Jeff to convince me they were my enemies and to be blinded to his own manipulation of myself. I had abdicated my role of leadership being the conflict avoider which allowed the conflict that had already arisen to fester and explode. In the end I have to take responsibility for being the one who brought Jeff into the ministry pool, and for where that congregation is today. Now four years later the congregation has reduced from seven hundred members to less than two hundred. It has gone from a budget surplus with a million dollars in the bank to an income of about one third of what it had and an empty bank account, now having to rent facility space to make payroll. Jeff is the administrative pastor and has every Sunday communion, but Bill moved on as did most of the elders, and many members. Two years ago, they called another senior pastor, and without spending the time and space to get into it, Jeff managed to work with the executive four to get him fired in less than six months. He now leads a neighboring congregation that is flourishing and hosts most of the people who have departed my former congregation. I share a great deal of responsibility for the decline of this congregation because I brought Jeff onboard, failed to recognize his weaknesses, failed to engage the anxiety and risk of the issue of every Sunday communion appropriately, and in the end accepted the call to resign because I did not want to deal with the fight. For their sake I might should have stayed, but in the end must confess that I was emotionally burnt out both from the emotional trauma of that past year and a half but also from my physical injury which almost took my ability to walk. So likely if I had stayed, the outcome would have been something similar, but I continue to grieve for a congregation I loved and spent years stabilizing to watch it fall apart in a short time.

Today I find myself thinking much more like Louw in regard to the intersection of orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthopathy in my ministry. He advocates for a descent approach that meets in the middle of the top-down emphasis on orthodoxy (which cannot be abandoned as faith is built on the foundation of Christ) and the bottom-up approach of being with the other in the midst of frailty, weakness, even brokenness. Even now I think of how Bill so strong and needing, demanding that practices be a certain way, had only his church family as his own Jewish family had abandoned him upon his conversion. Today I have more solidarity with suffering, both myself and others. So, when during my latest installation in a conflicted congregation when during the ceremony itself an older woman yelled “f… you” to another member (no I am not making that up), I could only smile to myself and indicate to the officiant to continue. I understand what it means to integrate personal brokenness to spiritual wholeness and ministry. A person can be both a victim and an agent of chaos, and an agent for change, good or bad. In Christ we may move beyond emotional reactivity to suffering to positive transformation. I have connected this experience of loss with my growth as a child of God and find comfort in surrender and recognition of my own weaknesses and those of others seeing pain and imperfection as the place we receive the gifts of God, encounter God in Word and Sacrament ministry. Rather than avoiding our pain or denying it, it becomes where God meets us with His gifts. God is present with us in our suffering, and this motivates me even more to proclaim His love, His forgiveness, and to advocate for healing and justice, for community, to beautify life through love and giving of dignity amidst the mutual imperfection of our lives. (Louw, 2021, pp. 88-90)

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