



Reformed Principles for Administering Baptism and the Lord's Supper (16th–18th c.)

Confessional Teachings on Sacrament Administration

Westminster Standards (Presbyterian): The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) clearly teaches that only ordained ministers may administer the two sacraments of the New Testament. It states that baptism and the Lord's Supper "neither of which may be dispensed by any, but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained" ¹. Likewise, the Westminster Larger Catechism reinforces that **the sacraments are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and by no one else** ². In summary, the Presbyterian understanding in the Westminster Standards is that a lawful minister of the Word (i.e. an ordained teaching elder) is exclusively authorized to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. This position was a reaction against both Roman Catholic practice (which allowed emergency lay baptism) and any idea of self-appointed administrators. It reflects the Reformed conviction that Christ gave the **"stewardship of the mysteries of God"** to the ordained ministry ³. Even preaching was carefully regulated – *licentiate*s (ministerial candidates) might be permitted to preach, but the Westminster divines deliberately excluded any not-yet-ordained person from administering the sacraments ⁴. In practice, this meant Presbyterian churches insisted that only a duly ordained minister could baptize or officiate at the Lord's Table.

Savoy Declaration (Congregational): Congregational churches in 17th-century England agreed with this principle. The Savoy Declaration of Faith (1658), a Congregational adaptation of the Westminster Confession, affirms that there are only two sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper) and **"neither of which may be dispensed by any but by a minister of the Word lawfully called"** ⁵. The wording "lawfully called" reflects Congregational polity (emphasizing a minister's call by a particular congregation) but carries the same meaning as "lawfully ordained." In other words, the Savoy Declaration allows **no administration of sacraments by private persons or laymen**, only by those set apart to the ministry. This was fully in line with Reformed orthodoxy; even the conservative Congregationalists saw the sacraments as an official function of the church's officers. The Savoy Declaration's stance mirrors Westminster's: a church's pastor/elder, duly chosen and appointed, alone administers the sacraments as Christ's ordinance.

Cambridge Platform (New England Congregational): The New England Puritans' Cambridge Platform of Church Discipline (1648) likewise confines sacramental administration to ordained church officers. While the Cambridge Platform is primarily about church government, it explicitly notes that the ministry of *Word and sacraments* is committed to the pastors and teachers of a congregation ⁶. In Congregational practice, pastors and teachers were the "teaching elders," and *both* were authorized to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper ⁷. By contrast, ruling elders (lay elders) shared in church governance but **did not preach or administer sacraments**, as those functions were *distinctly* the work of the ordained ministers ⁸. The Platform's preface even endorsed the Westminster Confession ⁸, indicating doctrinal agreement. New England's confession of faith (often printed alongside the Platform) echoed that **"neither of the sacraments may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word, lawfully called"** ⁹. Thus, in the conservative Puritan Congregational view, only a lawfully called minister of the gospel could baptize or administer the Lord's Supper in the church.

Application in Church Practice (England and Colonial America)

Presbyterian Practice in Britain and America: In accordance with their confessions, Presbyterian churches strictly limited sacramental administration to ordained ministers. During the Puritan era in England (1640s–1650s), the Westminster Directory for Public Worship explicitly instructed that **baptism “is not to be administered in any case by any private person, but by a minister of Christ”** ³, and that it must be done publicly in the congregation. This was a deliberate move away from pre-Reformation customs; for example, the Puritans rejected the Anglican allowance of private baptism by midwives in emergencies. After the Restoration (1660) when Presbyterian polity continued in nonconformist congregations, those dissenting churches maintained the same principle: only their recognized ministers officiated the sacraments. Ruling elders or deacons did **not** assume this role. As a 2013 commentary notes, the Westminster provisions explain why *“in Presbyterian churches ruling elders may not administer baptism or the Lord’s Supper.”* If a congregation had no pastor, they had to **engage an interim minister to administer the sacraments** rather than let a layman or elder perform them ¹⁰. This held true in Scotland as well, where the Church of Scotland (adhering to Westminster) treated the sacraments as part of the minister’s office; elders might assist in distributing communion, but only ministers consecrated and administered the elements.

In colonial America (18th century), Presbyterian practice continued to mirror this model. The first American presbyteries (founded 1706 onward) adopted the Westminster Standards, so American Presbyterian churches likewise insisted that only ordained clergymen administer the ordinances. Historical records show that frontier Presbyterian communities would sometimes go without the Lord’s Supper for long periods until an ordained minister could visit or be called as pastor ¹¹. Preaching services might be led by licentiates or lay exhorters in an emergency, but **the sacraments were reserved for ordained ministers**. For example, the Presbyterian Synod required that if a church was without a pastor, neighboring ministers or missionaries would baptize new converts and oversee communion on occasion. This cautious approach underscores how seriously Reformed churches took proper administration: sacraments were seen not as private rites but as church ordinances requiring church authority. As one Presbyterian historian explains, **“congregations without a minister must therefore engage an interim minister of some kind in order to administer the sacraments.”** This practice was grounded in the belief that sacraments must be accompanied by proper preaching and fencing of the table, tasks entrusted to trained ministers ¹² ¹³. In short, from the old world to the new, Presbyterians adhered to the confessional rule: no sacraments without an ordained minister of Word and Sacrament.

Congregational Practice in England and New England: The conservative Congregationalists (Independents) applied the same principle in their churches. In 17th-century England, leaders like John Owen emphasized that Christ gave the administration of ordinances to those in office, not to the congregation at large. Owen wrote that pastors (also called *bishops/elders* in Scripture) are to “attend their flocks, preaching the word, **administering the holy ordinances** of the gospel in and to their own flock” ¹⁴. He stressed that ministers are **“not self-authorized, but appointed by the church”** (through ordination) before they can perform such functions ¹⁴. This reflects actual practice: even in separatist or independent churches, a man had to be recognized and set apart as an elder before he could baptize or lead the Lord’s Supper. For instance, the early Independent churches formed by English Separatists in the late 16th century faced this issue. They often sought an ordained minister or arranged to have leaders ordained, because they believed it was improper for an unordained believer to administer sacraments. In one notable case, the Scrooby Separatist church (Pilgrims) emigrating to America had a ruling elder, **William Brewster**, serving as their spiritual leader. Brewster would lead prayers and preaching, but *“he would not administer the*

sacraments” since he was not a fully ordained minister ¹⁵. This situation persisted in Plymouth Colony until they could secure an ordained pastor. The Brewster example in 1620s New England highlights the strong commitment to this principle: the Pilgrims preferred to forego communion for a time rather than violate the principle of proper administration.

In New England Congregational churches of the 17th–18th centuries, the norm was that **no baptism or communion could be conducted without an ordained minister present**. Each gathered church called and ordained its own minister (or sometimes more than one, as “pastor” and “teacher”), and that minister alone performed baptisms and consecrated the Lord’s Supper elements. If a church was between pastors, they typically invited a minister from a neighboring town or waited until a new pastor was ordained to resume communion. Contemporary church records and the Cambridge Platform itself show that ruling elders managed church discipline and temporal matters, but did not take it upon themselves to baptize or serve the Supper ⁶. The **Half-Way Covenant** controversy in New England (mid-1600s) involved *who* should be baptized (children of partial church members), but notably **never questioned that only ministers could perform the baptism** – even advocates of broader baptismal access assumed an ordained elder would administer the rite. By the 18th century, Congregational churches in America still held this line. Cotton Mather, for example, in his writings upheld that the sacraments are holy administrations for Christ’s officers to dispense, not acts for laypersons. Even during seasons of revival (the Great Awakening), New England “New Light” Congregationalists, though sometimes at odds with their elders, did not abandon the requirement of ordination for administering sacraments. In cases where new separatist congregations formed, they would promptly ordain their chosen ministers so that baptisms and communion could be properly administered.

Summary: Across the theologically conservative Presbyterian and Congregational traditions of the 16th–18th centuries, there was remarkable agreement on this point: **only lawfully ordained/clergy members were permitted to administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper**. The major Reformed confessions – Westminster, Savoy, the Cambridge Platform’s statements – all explicitly restrict sacramental administration to ordained ministers ¹ ⁵ ⁶. This theology was consistently put into practice in church life. Whether in a Presbyterian classis in England, a Congregational meeting-house in Massachusetts, or a frontier Presbyterian congregation in the American colonies, the pattern held: **lay members or unordained elders did not administer the sacraments**. Churches without pastors would delay observance or seek an ordained person rather than compromise this order ¹² ¹⁵. The underlying reasoning was both biblical and practical: sacraments are covenant signs that require proper preaching, fencing (guarding against improper participation), and authoritative blessing, which the Reformed believed Christ entrusted to the church’s officers, not to any believer at large ¹⁶ ¹⁰. Thus, in the 16th–18th century Presbyterian and Congregational churches, **baptism and the Lord’s Supper were strictly administered by ordained ministers of the gospel**, in accordance with their confessional standards and the precedent set by Reformed practice from Geneva to New England.

Sources: Major confessional documents and catechisms of the period (Westminster Confession & Larger Catechism; Savoy Declaration; Cambridge Platform) all specify that only lawfully ordained ministers may administer sacraments ¹ ² ⁵ ⁶. Historical examples and directives (e.g. the Westminster Directory for Worship; writings of John Owen; New England church records) confirm that this rule was upheld in practice ³ ¹⁰ ¹⁵ ¹⁴, both in England and in colonial America. The restriction of sacramental administration to ordained clergy was a settled aspect of Reformed church order in the 16th–18th centuries, as evidenced by both the confessional texts and the lived reality of church life in those traditions.

1 **WCF CHAPTER 27: Of the Sacraments :: The Westminster Standards with Video and Audio Teaching Resources**

<https://thewestminsterstandards.com/wcf-chapter-27-of-the-sacraments/>

2 **Meaning of A Lawfully ordained minister | The Puritan Board**

<https://puritanboard.com/threads/meaning-of-a-lawfully-ordained-minister.75160/>

3 **The Westminster Directory for Public Worship: 7 | Relight**

<https://relight.app/resource/WDPW.7>

4 13 **Appendix B: Ministers of the Word, by Donald A. Dunkerley**

<https://pcahistory.org/pca/digest/studies/2-471.html>

5 **Savoy Declaration of Faith | Reformed Standards**

<https://reformedstandards.com/british/savoy.html>

6 7 8 **Cambridge Platform - Wikipedia**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cambridge_Platform

9 14 16 **Who Should Administer the Sacraments? – by Dr. C. Matthew McMahon | Reformed Theology at A Puritan's Mind**

<http://www.apuritansmind.com/pastors-study/who-administers-the-sacraments-by-dr-c-matthew-mcmahon/>

10 11 12 **Chapter 27.4 - Reformation 21**

<https://www.reformation21.org/confession/2013/07/chapter-274.php>

15 **Brewster, William - Biblical Cyclopedia**

<https://www.biblicalcyclopedia.com/B/brewster-william.html>