

A Pastoral Brief on the Issue of "Virtual Communion"

In Nomine Jesu

Brothers,

Serious questions require serious answers. Serious answers require time, meditation, and prayer. Crises, on the other hand, produce stress. Stress generates haste, and haste can give rise to less-than-ideal decisions and actions. It's not necessarily a question of love. In a stressful time, one can easily say, "There's little opportunity for study!" or "This is more a time for doing than for praying!" The difficulty is, in times of crisis, our love may become misdirected, even with all the good intentions in the world.

We are faced with a serious question now: whether or not to offer virtual communion. The Covid-19 virus has separated congregations into their individual houses so that we cannot gather together in person anymore. Households can only receive the Word by mail or stream worship services via the internet.

Sooner or later we would have had to address this matter. After all, the marvels of virtual communication have been in general use among us since the turn of the millennium. But the current emergency has filled the issue with all the fierce urgency of now. We hear that some are already offering the Lord's Supper using virtual means. We must ask, "Are these good and valid ways of celebrating what Christ instituted or not? If not, why not?"

Before we go any further, let us make clear that no one is judging hearts or impugning the pastoral instincts of those who have decided to offer communion in this way. People are hurting. People are afraid. People, our people, long for the comfort of the gospel. They hunger for the Sacrament in particular. A pastor would have to be made of stone not to be concerned for the needs of his flock in such circumstances.

Let us also be clear what we mean by the expression "virtual communion." We mean members of a congregation celebrating the Lord's Supper, each in their own homes, yet connected to one another via the internet. The service is still conducted by the pastor.¹ He leads the liturgy, says the prayers, and speaks or sings the Words of Institution (thus intending a consecration of the elements). But all this happens while the congregation is still physically separated. It happens virtually, with connections made by means of technology. Each head of household must gather the family together beforehand, provide the elements² and, at the proper time, distribute them while the pastor says, "Take eat..." "Take drink..."

¹ Some wonder about virtual communion if it is used with only a single household, or perhaps with one individual that a pastor used to commune privately. Our answer would not change: the practice is essentially the same in both cases. People are celebrating the Lord's Supper virtually, over the internet, while the officiant is physically separated from the recipient.

² How the elements are provided, and in what form is, in itself, a practical and a pastoral issue. In it the Devil can find a rich opportunity to sow a great deal of uncertainty. Curious questions will spring up like weeds: what if the recipients use leavened bread? What if grape juice is substituted for wine? What if plum wine or elderberry wine is used instead of the "fruit of the vine"? What if a parishioner feels in her heart that it really should be the kind of unleavened wafer and the wine that pastor always uses at church, but which is not available to her? What if she communes anyway even if her conscience is hesitant? Some of these questions involve indifferent matters. Some do not. But they can all foster doubt and uncertainty in a communicant's mind, something no pastor wants. Just the fact that now the parishioner has to supply for himself what used to be taken care of by others will inevitably raise these and other questions.

We do not include here practices which might be called "house" communion or even "self" communion. Those would be occasions where heads of household (relying, perhaps, on a faulty understanding of their rights as universal priests) might want to lead the worship themselves and officiate at their family's celebration of the Lord's Supper. That such a practice is unwise and incorrect has been a settled matter among Lutherans for centuries now. Luther once wrote to Wolfgang Brauer, a pastor asking how to advise a member who wanted to do something like this.³ Without limiting the right of the individual to teach the Word to his family, Luther declares:

Kindly tell your friend that he is *not* in duty bound to go ahead...and commune himself and his household. Nor is this necessary, since he has neither call or command to do so....he can still be saved by his faith through the Word. It would also give great offense to administer the Sacrament here and there in the homes, and in the end no good would come of it, for there will be factions and sects....The Sacrament is a public confession and should have public ministers.⁴

No shrinking violet when it came to innovation for the sake of the gospel, Luther's cautions here have a broader relevance than simply to warn us off the practice of "house" communion. In a general way he is directing us to the path of wisdom and love.

Some Thoughts on the Matter

This is a strange time and has caused some strange and paradoxical crosses. Never has there been a time when we more needed and wanted to gather together with our brothers and sisters around Word and Sacrament. But we can't. At least, not completely. We still gather in our virtual worship around the Word. But it's not the same. And we know it. Love draws us together. The love of Christ makes us yearn to join "in the festal procession up to the altar" (Psalm 118:27).

But that same love now keeps us at a distance. How could I, by my physical presence, hurt or even be an unwitting cause of harm to my brother or my sister, someone for whom Christ died? Covid-19 may keep us at a distance, but it cannot stop our love from reaching out. And so we ask, "Could there still be another way in these strange times to celebrate the Lord's Supper?"

It is with firm conviction that we feel compelled to answer, with respect, that virtual communion is not the path of wisdom. It is not the way of love.⁵ Our reasons are as follows.

³ The case involved a Lutheran man living under a "tyrannical bishop" who would not, obviously, be eager to appoint Lutheran pastors to assemble and care for Lutheran flocks in his diocese. He wondered if he could offer the Lord's Supper to his own family.

⁴ As qtd. in CFW Walther, *The Church and the Office of the Ministry*. 1st edition. Concordia Publishing, 2012, 163.

⁵ With this we are not speaking against other non-virtual ways pastors might seek, in this time of crisis, to offer the Lord's Supper while still observing the guidelines of the government. These include social distancing church arrangements; individual communion by appointment; gathering smaller household groups by appointment together, etc. We would see these as legitimate and loving efforts to help those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness."

⁶ **We are speaking of "the way of love" here not as the impulse of a kind and affectionate heart. We are rather referring to something more objective: the new man's desire to be fully conformed to the image**

An uncertain practice makes for an uncertain Sacrament

The history of the church demonstrates that the Holy Supper has provided fertile ground for controversy. Some of the questions in the past arose from obvious unbelief, the thought that our Lord could not do what he said he would do. Others came from the more subtle problem of a curious heart, one that poses questions the text cannot answer. Still other controversies arose from practices that caused offense, such as when Carlstadt suddenly imposed communion in both kinds upon the inhabitants of Wittenberg. It is clear that our enemy Satan wants to do everything in his power to deprive us of this precious gift. It comes as no surprise then to observe that, after Luther's death, still more controversies regarding the Holy Supper erupted in Germany.

The spirit of compromise misled Melancthon into downplaying the substantial reality of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament. What he thought was love, wasn't. It was a compromise that sacrificed truth. With his emendations, he tried to make the Augsburg Confession a document more congenial to those who favored Calvin's understanding of the *Verba*.

Besides Melancthon, another pastor, John Saliger, insisted that the Real Presence persisted even after the common meal was over. This could easily have led to Roman Catholic practices like the reservation of the host in a "tabernacle,"⁷ carrying it around in processions, and other practices outside the normal administration of the Sacrament.

The "crypto-Calvinists" infiltrated the University of Wittenberg, teaching a very subtle and nuanced departure from the truth. Instead of teaching the Real Presence, they taught a "spiritual presence" of Jesus in the Lord's Supper. They taught that it is the faith of the recipient that determines any benefit gained from communion: a believer apprehends Jesus and receives him spiritually by faith; an unbeliever receives nothing. The subterfuge of these "subtle Sacramentarians" was exposed, and the erring professors were expelled.

As you know, these controversies were finally resolved by the Formula of Concord. We encourage all our brothers to reread Article VII of the Formula. Note what our fathers have said and the reverent way they say it. Consider their earnest desire to remain faithful to what Christ instituted when he said, "Do this!" Observe how they held on tenaciously to the simple truth. Finally, notice how they could have said more, but didn't. They clearly did not want to stir up more questions and controversies.

The practice of virtual communion injects—whether we like it or not—a whole host of questions into the celebration of the Holy Supper. Here are just some we have heard: is the virtual presence of the pastor the same as his customary physical presence in church during communion? Since the pastor is not actually handling the elements, is his consecration still efficacious and in keeping with Christ's command? Is the communal nature of the first meal sufficiently preserved if reduplicated electronically, with a physical separation of tens, hundreds, even thousands of miles? In virtual communion, is the

and majesty of Christ. The way of love is to want what God wants, to desire what he commands, to treasure every word that comes from his mouth. Love does no harm to one's neighbor. It builds up the church. It walks in harmony with others in one fellowship. It is concerned about what is appropriate and loves good order in worship. It pursues the way of peace. We can all remember times when, with a kind and affectionate heart, we pursued a path we thought was loving, but which subsequently turned out to be a false trail. Subjective love was certainly there. But since it was misdirected, it did not conform to the objective way of Christ and we did not persist in it once it was shown to be false.

⁷ Putting consecrated bread in a special, ornate, box in the altar.

impression given that the recitation of the *Verba* by the pastor is more like an incantation than a consecration? Is virtual communion a real, valid Sacrament?

It is tempting to answer these questions with a firm 'yes' or a firm 'no.' We are aware that there are some in our fellowship who are convinced that virtual communion is simply not the Sacrament. Others may be personally convinced that it is. Speaking for ourselves, we confess that these questions are too deep for us to unravel. With the Holy Supper, we would far prefer to preserve our souls as a "weaned child within us" (Psalm 131:2). Answering one question, we fear, might start a whole chain reaction of suppositions. One answer begets another question—and another and another! Believing hearts are soon led away from the simplicity of the Sacrament into speculation.

Here's what we do know. Jesus said, "Do this!" and in so doing has commanded us to offer the Supper following his basic pattern. He has attached his hand to our doing. We know that he was physically present with his disciples when he took the cup, the same cup that the disciples drank. Similarly, he was physically present when he took the bread, the same bread that he gave his disciples to distribute among themselves.

Is a virtual consecration spoken via technology the same as a normal consecration in church? Is a pastor still following the same sequence of basic actions that occurred in the Supper's institution? We don't know. But we do know this: it is uncertain.

To pose the same questions in a slightly more technical way: we know that the Formula of Concord is clear in wanting to keep the Sacramental *usus* or *actio* one undivided sequence. The formulators stated the same in the words of a theological axiom, *Nihil habet rationem sacramenti extra usum a Christo institutum*.⁸ After citing the axiom, they explained it as follows:

When Christ's institution is not observed as he established it, there is no sacrament. This rule dare not be rejected in any way. ... The *usus* or *actio* (that is, the practice or administration) does not refer primarily to faith or to the oral partaking, but to the entire external, visible administration of the Supper: the consecration or Words of Institution, and the distribution and reception or oral partaking. ... Apart from this practice it is not to be regarded as a sacrament—for example, when ... the bread is not distributed but is made into a sacrifice or enclosed in a tabernacle, or carried about in a procession, or displayed for adoration.⁹

Is a single consecration at a distance over multiple tables of bread and wine doing the same thing as that which happened "when Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread etc."? We don't know. But we do know this: it is uncertain.

Because it is uncertain, the practice of virtual communion is neither wise nor loving. Consider Paul's statement in Romans, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin" (14:23). Paul is not so much talking about saving faith, in that context, as the confidence one has that an action is God-pleasing. If we are not confident that we are doing the right thing, if we are troubled with thoughts that it may be sinful, then for us it *is* sinful, because we are acting against conscience. This is true not only for the officiant if he has doubts, but also for any of our members who, with doubting consciences, go ahead despite them and participate virtually.

⁸ "Nothing has the character of a Sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ."

⁹ FC SD VII, 85-87. Kolb Wengert, 608

We are talking about the possibility of causing offense in the biblical sense. Such members of ours are not just being "put off," but may actually suffer shipwreck of faith because they are receiving what they do not know. That means lives are at stake, spiritual lives. It would be more than tragically ironic if, because we wanted to preserve the physical well-being of our brothers and sisters in the time of Covid, we engaged in a practice that harmed their spiritual well-being instead.

This uncertainty creates an even more fundamentally insurmountable problem for anyone wishing to consider it a wise practice. The entire purpose of the Sacrament is, as the Lord's Last Will and Testament, to make certainty doubly sure. It was intended to breathe confidence into despairing hearts, to give strength to anxious and wavering spirits. But how can something uncertain make someone certain? It simply cannot! And this is the kind of uncertainty for which there is no remedy. No amount of study or discussion can make the text say more or less than what it actually says. We know what Jesus did. We know what he told us to do. We know what the Supper is, "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink."¹⁰ Is virtual communion "doing" what Christ told us to do? We do not know. But we do know this, it is uncertain.

"Nothing is more miserable than uncertainty," Luther once said. And there's nothing more distinctive about the way Lutherans preach the gospel than by the way we deal in certainties. When the pastor pronounces absolution to his congregation, or proclaims the unconditional gospel in a sermon, he does not say, "*Most* of you are forgiven." Rather, "Jesus died for all," we say, "for the ungodly—sinners like you and me." We proclaim, "In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins." There's nothing uncertain about that.

Perhaps one might object that questions about the validity of virtual communion seem trivial. The truth is, no one can be made certain by another person's certainty. And, in fact, questioning virtual communion's validity has a legitimate, commonsense basis. It all comes down to one essential problem: is virtual presence the same as physical presence? Does being there virtually differ from being there physically? Ask the woman serving our country in Iraq and Facetiming her children at home! Ask the teacher, communicating to his class online! It seems very clear that technological connections, though wonderful, are at best a poor substitute for really being there. Does such a commonsense consideration make a difference for when we think about our gathering around the Lord's Table? We don't know. But that's the point. How can a pastor celebrate the Supper when he knows he has injected an element of uncertainty into what is meant to be a testament of certainty? It is not the path of wisdom. It is not the way of love.

The Lord's Supper is not an absolute necessity for strengthening and preserving faith

The last thing we would want to do is even to appear to downplay the importance of the gospel as it comes to us in the Holy Supper. As we come together, we proclaim the Lord's death till he comes, even as we each receive personally Christ's own body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. No wonder we yearn to celebrate it! It is a cross to go without it.

¹⁰ The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther. Edited by Stephen Geiger, Joel Otto, John Braun, and Ray Schumacher. Northwestern, 2017, 350.

But the gospel is not bound to the Lord's Supper alone, as if that were the only way we could receive forgiveness. When, out of external necessity or out of consideration for the health and well-being of others, we forego it for a time, Jesus has not left us as orphans. The gospel of baptism is the same gospel. His promise of forgiveness through the washing of water and the Word remains powerful and effective for our entire lives. God also conveys the same gospel of forgiveness to us when we hear it proclaimed by our pastors in our virtual worship. The same is true when we listen to godly devotions on the internet, when we teach the catechism to our children, and when we simply read our Bibles in our personal devotions at home. As Luther says in his Large Catechism:

At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints.¹¹

If the Sacrament were the only means by which Jesus offered the blessings of forgiveness, this might be a different conversation. But in his mercy, he has provided many ways for us to hear his death proclaimed and to receive its blessings. There is no absolute necessity to receive the Supper to receive forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Conclusion

Many have remarked that we are living through history. This crisis does have an earth-shaking feel about it. The world that emerges after Covid may look quite different than what it was before. The deeper truth is this: God means to humble us under his mighty hand. Yet in his essential nature, God remains a Giver even when he appears to take. He has only our good in mind when he teaches us the wisdom of the cross. And already some of his lessons are becoming clear.

More than anything during this time of enforced isolation, God has taught us how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity (Psalm 133). We are filled with a deep and powerful yearning to sit in a church in the presence of others and hear directly the voice of our pastor and shepherd. With the psalmist we feel it a great oppression to suffer exile from the "festive throng" (Psalm 42). We long for the Holy Supper where we can rub shoulders with our fellow members, thinking of their burdens and cares as, together, we receive our Lord's body and blood. In him there is no distance between us, none at all, as we gather with all the saints on earth and hosts of heaven.

We can understand why caring pastors in these exigent circumstances might seek extraordinary means to meet their peoples' needs. Yet still we must say, this is not wise. This is not loving. When the children cry for bread, we dare not give them a stone instead.

Sometimes it takes more love *not to do* something than it does *to do* something. A Christian, as much as possible, wants to be sure in all things. He wants to know and be sure of what he believes. He wants to know and believe that he is living a life pleasing to God. Especially when we deal with the holy things of God, we want to stand on the firm ground of God's Word. When Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me" we want to be sure we are doing what he has asked us to do.

Rather than do what is uncertain, let's hold fast to what is beyond all doubt. Jesus has not left us without other ways of remembering him. Let us encourage our people to

¹¹ LC I 92, Kolb Wengert, 399.

remember the Easter gospel. Jesus will not let the fears of his disciples, nor the doors they have locked tight against the world get between him and those he loves. He stands in their midst and gives them his peace. Let us encourage our people to remember their baptism, how in Christ now we are all one. Young, old, sick, healthy, lonely, isolated—whatever divides us, whatever may keep us from being together, nothing can separate us from his love. That means there is no space between us. Between him and us. Between me and my brothers and sisters. These things we remember. Of these things we are sure.

This is the remembering that heals all memories. This is the memory that makes all things new. This is the memory that gathers up the times—of sadness and sorrow, sin and death, happiness and joy, closeness, distance, life, death, past, present, future—all into one great moment of eternal love where, gathered together, God speaks to each one of us personally, "You are mine! I am yours!" And so it will be forever!

Fraternally,

The Conference of Presidents