



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

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The Ordinance and Institution of the Lord's Supper: A Fraternal Discussion about Online Home Communion

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it much change and tumult to the world. Pandemics and plagues, however, are nothing new in the longer history of the Holy Christian Church. Periodic contagions swept through Europe from the 14th to the 18th centuries, killing millions and disrupting church life all across the continent. One hundred years ago, our great-grandparents faced the Spanish influenza pandemic, and there were closures in cities around our country then, including churches. However, this is a new experience for us. Temporary government orders to *stay at home* or *shelter in place* and the corresponding social distancing requirements to slow the spread of the disease have put normal congregational gatherings on hold.

Unique to our pandemic context is the digital age in which it is occurring and which the Church has been navigating now for a generation. To be sure, the proliferation of social media with their competing information streams has complicated clear thinking and rational choices at times. Yet on the whole, the digital technology of our day has provided new and effective tools for congregations and pastors to use in care of their flocks.

Despite the pandemic, this is a great time to be in ministry for the Lord Jesus. Seemingly overnight, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted everything secondary to be set aside. Now instantly Christ and His Gospel gifts are front and center. Lutheran pastors are well equipped to adjust to this fluid situation and its unprecedented challenges because we know who we are and what we have been given to do. We have the unchanging truth of God's Word to meet a constantly changing environment. Rather than being pushed about by the panic of this fluctuating context, we have the calming text of God's Word to be our guide no matter the context.

As such, pastors have been put into situations in which we have had to ask challenging questions with respect to both theology and practice. In particular, the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper has been front and center as we think through how best to bring these Gospel gifts to our people in this trying time. Love for our people and esteem for the Sacrament is compelling pastors to explore alternative practices of administering the Lord's Supper. Some pastors are providing opportunities to receive Communion in the setting of many abbreviated services for groups of 10 or fewer. Others are announcing a fast from the Lord's Supper in public worship until the health restrictions are lifted while providing individual Communion upon request.

However, one of the more pressing questions about the Lord's Supper that has arisen in this current situation is whether or not to offer opportunities for Communion in some online fashion. This is the idea where members would have some form of bread and wine in their homes and the words of institution spoken via video stream to consecrate these elements, and then self-administer Communion to themselves within their homes. The Committee on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) recently provided some very helpful guidance for LCMS Lutherans regarding the Lord's Supper in this present health crisis.¹ Nonetheless, discussions and questions continue.²

¹ *Communion and COVID-19*, March 20, 2020:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5122917ce4b08a7615958803/t/5e7536143c1a5873c6c909f6/1584739861611/Communion+and+Covid-19+LMV+JDL+4.pdf> Additionally, the CTCR also provided an opinion in 2006 about using DVD videos for consecration that is hyper-linked within the above document.

² For our LCMS circles, consider the April 6 blog post by Pastor Greg Finke, titled "A Counter Opinion: Why We Can Celebrate Online Communion with Confidence," <https://dwelling114.org/blog/2020/4/6/a-counter-opinion-why-we-can-celebrate-online-communion-with-confidence>. Consider also the March 27, 2020, online article by Chris Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental: The Bread and the Cup Zoomed for you," from *Christianity*

Some view administering online Communion positively. Based on the power of the Word of God to transcend space and time, they respectfully contend that online administration of the Lord's Supper should be a legitimate consideration. Those who disagree do so for a host of reasons, but perhaps their chief concern is the understanding of what constitutes the last will and testament of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Holy Supper is the gift He has bequeathed to His church for all time, and they assert it is essential that what we do and say does not diminish or change that gift.

In other words, does the Lord's last will and testament require merely use of the Words of Institution in some fashion, or does it also include adhering to the whole incarnate setting of the Last Supper that Jesus instituted in the upper room on the night of His betrayal as part of His command to "do this"? This incarnate setting in which all participants are present together in the same space is what our LCMS seminary faculties have recently called the "communal meal aspect" in their recent joint statement regarding the Lord's Supper administered via livestream.³

A Call for Fraternal and Theologically Rigorous Discussion

At the heart of this consideration is whether the physical assembly of believers is paramount to proper adherence to the Lord's last will and testament, and if so, does the current COVID-19 crisis provide adequate rationale (or permission) to set aside any such potential requirement? This paper aims to thoughtfully explore these issues.

Admittedly, my perspective is that we should move away from any online practice of the Lord's Supper for reasons that I will cover below. However, I hope that bias will not prohibit a fair hearing of an alternative perspective even as we take an objective look at our theology and practice. I believe that with all the uncertainty and newness of our pandemic situation, it's especially important that we engage in fraternal and rigorous theological discussion of varying perspectives as we work this out together as the body of Christ. This would include a mutual understanding on the balance between pragmatism and the Word of God.

In short, we are in this together. Opposing viewpoints do not automatically mean we have to be enemies. In fact, the Apostle Paul reminds us, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12 ESV). Theological wrestling is a salutary thing we can do together as brothers in Christ. It is not always easy, neat, or tidy. It can feel a bit clumsy or even cold. But the ultimate goal we pastors all desire is to serve our people lovingly and faithfully while upholding the truth of Scripture and the Confessions.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is not to foster the idea that whoever can assemble the biggest pile of supporting quotations from our esteemed church fathers or from the Scriptures and Confessions "wins" the argument and gets to thump their chests in victory. Rather, the goal is to collegially and fraternally take into account Scripture and the Confessions along with all that has been said by generations who have gone before us, letting them guide our reflection upon our doctrine and practice as it pertains to the question of online home Communion.

The Issue in Question

The central issue for consideration might be summed up like this: If our stay at home or shelter in place government orders continue for an extended period of time, would online home

Today, which advocates for online communion: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/online-communion-can-still-be-sacramental.html>

³ "Communion in a Time of Social Distancing," April 2, 2020.

Communion with remote consecration be a theologically reasonable and acceptable practice for LCMS pastors to engage in? To further explain, the issue here is intentionally being framed within the confines of an emergency setting. For the purpose of this paper, an emergency means, "You can't not do what you normally would do." To be sure, the nature of an emergency does often provide greater flexibility (or permission) in many circumstances. Augustine's example of two men about to die on a sinking ship comes to mind, where one man baptizes the other, who then pronounces absolution upon the former.⁴ The point for us to consider is whether or not the current situation meets the criteria of an emergency. Admittedly, I remain unconvinced that our current situation falls within the historic definitions of an emergency as defined below.

Therefore, after considering what constitutes an emergency, the next question becomes whether or not remote consecration of the elements of wine and bread should be considered an efficacious and salutary practice.

In short, based upon the transcendent power of God's Word to go through space and time, can an argument be made from the power of God's Word to confidently conclude that virtual consecration unequivocally affects the elements? In other words, would speaking the Words of Institution in real time through a video screen actually and really consecrate the individual elements within the homes of those who have logged on to that specific virtual Holy Communion service so that they partake of the Savior's actual body and blood?

Before we dig deeper, we must make some assumptions clear for adequate consideration of this proposal. Proper preparation of communicants for admission to the Lord's Table is always a pastoral responsibility. First, it will be assumed that all those members who are restricted to their homes by this pandemic and are desiring online home Communion will have been instructed and catechized by their pastors, particularly in both the unusual nature of this proposal as well as the reverent manner of approaching the elements of the Lord's Supper. Second, close(d) Communion remains the assumed practice, where precautions to password protect the virtual gatherings and provide pastoral care against accidental online participants, even as this is the ordinary practice that occurs in person. Third, the elements being used would be clearly set aside and be those which fall within normal Lutheran use for Communion elements, namely, unleavened bread and wine.

Again, though I am not recommending or endorsing this practice, to ensure adequate and fair consideration of this possibility, these assumptions (which are simply the standard for all ordinary congregational practices of the Lord's Supper among us) need to be made for any online virtual Service of the Sacrament to be considered. Respectfully, each of these issues could be expounded upon further as points of concern that could also give us pause regarding this potential practice of online Communion, but for the sake of this paper, they are being assumed. Thus, with these assumptions in place, we will first briefly explore the digital age of our pandemic context which has prompted this consideration, while also noting some of the inherent challenges of technology.

Our Digital Age

Ministering to souls amid a pandemic is nothing new to the history of the Holy Christian Church. However, doing so in a digital age is new. Digital technology has rendered our current context very different from times past. In short, our digital age is a blessing and a curse. Many blessings have occurred from technological advances, including those in health care, communication, education, and all types of commerce. However, technology is never neutral. It carries with it many assumptions or requirements on how it must be used. (E.g., the telephone

⁴ Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 67, *Book of Concord*. Tappert, p. 331.

could not first be used without ears; a TV was to be watched with the eyes—it afforded the opportunity to see a show apart from being physically present in the studio yet required the use of a physical television set). Therefore, how technology is employed for ministry must have a constant evaluation and assessment regarding the medium and the message.⁵ Even as we utilize technology's wonderful benefits, we must regularly evaluate its use so that we do not unwittingly fall prey to what decades ago Neil Postman already noted to be the ruthless and effective trivializing of "significant cultural symbols," not least of which are those in religious traditions.⁶

Part of this digital discussion has come to include the concepts of what it means to be present with someone. Our virtual world has afforded many new opportunities formerly only dreamed of. However, philosophical and pragmatic challenges remain. For example, would a video conference platform that affords for the audio and visual appearance of an individual actually constitute "real presence"? Is a person's voice and visual image the same as being in that person's physical presence? After all, it is the "real presence" of people and of the Lord at His Supper that lies at the heart of this discussion.

Consider the proposal of one Christian writer outside our Lutheran circles. He contends that contemporary views regarding physical presence actually permit online Communion, even in sacramental churches. Chris Ridgeway, writing for *Christianity Today*, bases his argument for online Communion in part upon the premise that a digital culture has radically shifted the understanding of what it means to be present: "The essential word is presence—along with the dramatic and sustained cultural shift in our understanding of it. A daily digital culture has shaped our interactions to the point that human presence is not synonymous to physicality."⁷ For him, if the Word of God is present, having a virtual Zoom conference with the Lord's Supper would be an appropriate and apt way to meet the crisis caused by COVID-19.

Ridgeway's contention is that a Zoom conference demonstrates that "being present doesn't require being in person."⁸ But does that meet our theological criteria? It may reflect a philosophical thought present within our culture, but does that claim stand up to the theological examination of a sacramental church body? (Anecdotally, many who have been in extended isolation are finding virtual presence to be deficient in resolving their loneliness and other potential daily needs.⁹)

The claim that human presence is not synonymous to physicality is a startling claim for Christians. We value the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. At a minimum, we would need to

⁵ Complicating how the church deals with the digital age is the trending trajectory of our North American culture that has moved beyond just being secular and is now migrating closer to paganism or at least neopaganism. Within that trend, there is also the reoccurrence of neo-Gnostic practices (made anew in our digital age), which devalue the physical in favor of the emotional or spiritual experience of a person.

⁶ *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Showbusiness*. "Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence..." p.116

⁷ Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental."

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Even in a digital culture with all of its virtual tools, the normal and regular practice of "human presence" remains that of real physical interaction. For example, crisis or not, parents cannot adequately parent toddlers without being physically present. Researchers have long demonstrated the importance of physical presence and touch both for the development of infants as well as the well-being of the elderly. Further, though "e-visits" are used increasingly in psychotherapy and medical care, there are limitations to their effectiveness in accurate diagnosis and especially for treatment of real, live people. Doctors in our COVID-19 environment continue to physically see and physically treat patients with the coronavirus. As dangerous as it might be to their own health, it cannot be done any other way. In other words, a doctor cannot manipulate a patient's body for accurate diagnosis, administer shots or medicine, or conduct surgery without being in the physical presence of the patient. At a minimum, this challenges the idea that "presence" does not require physicality.

consider this claim in light of the incarnate underpinnings of our theology confessed by the Word of God.

The Word of God (in a Digital Age)

Genesis records the power of God's Word. He speaks and creation happens (Gen. 1:1-3). God creates space and time by His Word. For hundreds of years, God spoke through space and time by His Word. Prophets, priests, and kings spoke the Word of God, while God also occasionally demonstrated His presence in pillars of cloud or fire, through His angel/messengers, or through a still small voice (Heb. 1:1-2). But there came a time when that very Word of God that created all there is was sent into human flesh (John 1:14). Jesus was deliberately confined to space and time in the form of a man. In other words, the Word of God had its "locatedness" in a physical human male. He was incarnate. Beginning as an embryo within His virgin mother, He was born and grew as a normal human being. He was then crucified, dead, buried, raised on Easter, and ascended on high.

After sending His Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to speak to us today through His Word inscribed in Holy Scripture. This certainly includes the Word in its audible/oral forms, but also in its sacramental forms, which Jesus instituted before leaving this earth. Our Lutheran Confessions speak of the sacraments as a "visible Word", that is, they are the Word of God joined to a divinely instituted human rite.¹⁰ The Lord Jesus gave baptism as a watered Word (Matt. 28:19) and His Last Supper as an edible Word (Matt. 26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, 1 Cor. 11:23-24). Lutherans call these three gifts the Means of Grace, which constitute our Word and Sacrament ministry.

They are each distinct means by which the Lord extends His grace, mercy, and forgiveness to be received in faith. Each of them certainly applies the promises of the Word of God, but that does not mean they are all interchangeable. Baptism and the Lord's Supper have very specific actions, instructions, and elements that accompany them in addition to the audible Word of God. Therefore, we do well to note the distinctive manners in which the Lord Jesus chooses to locate His presence and power in each sacrament.

To be clear, the ascended Christ fills all the universe with His presence, but He is not available everywhere. Rather, He is available where He has promised to be—in His Word. He can certainly reveal Himself in other ways, but He has not chosen to do so. Nor has He given us anywhere else to find Him and His Holy Spirit other than in the Word of God.

As it pertains to the discussion at hand, God's Word certainly has power in and of itself. It says what it does and does what it says. It is not limited by space and time. Yet it is limited to the means by which God ordained it to be received. No ears to hear, eyes to read, mouths to eat, or body to be washed, and the Lord is not received. Not because He is powerless to deliver Himself by some other means, but because He chose to limit the reception of His Word to these specific ways.

Accordingly, how might these divinely ordered and limited means of reception come into play in the conversation about online home Communion? God's Word can transcend space and time, be streamed over the internet and go into earholes around the globe. But would the limitations of the watered Word (Baptism) and edible Word (Lord's Supper) allow it to be administered virtually in the same way as the audible Word? Is the physical presence of the person needed in order to receive Baptism and the Lord's Supper, or can a person and the elements be self-administered while a pastor speaks the corresponding Words remotely by virtual presence? Even more, can an emergency truly alter how we would answer that?

¹⁰ Apology XIII, 5. Tappert, p.212.

These are important questions that necessarily lead to considerations that go beyond the audible Word of God, to the medium and manner by which the sacramental Word of God is to be administered to His people. Here, the incarnate nature of the Lord becomes important to keep in mind as we consider these questions. His ministry was, after all, in the flesh (incarnate), and what He left us in His Last Supper invariably has an incarnate context to it rather than a discarnate context (i.e., lack of physicality or presence).

But before we consider those questions, it's important to address the validity and efficacy of God's Word in and of itself, especially as it relates to online Communion.

The Efficacy of the Word of God

Within our Lutheran circles, an argument in favor of online home Communion has been made on the basis of the efficacious nature of God's Word. This argument holds that the Word of God, even if spoke remotely or online, is always capable of consecrating the elements in the Lord's Supper. One pastor put it this way:

During this uncertain, dangerous pandemic, when we are unable to gather in our church buildings at our altars, many faithful LCMS congregations throughout the U.S. have been offering the Lord's Supper online. It is simple to do. Members have bread and wine in their homes. The pastor speaks the words of institution via a live internet connection. Having heard and believed the Words of Jesus, the members eat the bread and drink the wine... just like they have always done since they were confirmed. In the eating and drinking, members believe they have received what Jesus promises, His very body and blood for the forgiveness of their sins. Gift offered. Gift received. At the core of this confidence is a simple, well known Lutheran belief: The Words of Jesus are the Words of Jesus no matter how they are conveyed.¹¹

The above pastor's point is that if we believe the power of God's Word is truly efficacious, why would we say it cannot consecrate the elements via the internet? In effect, he's asking, "Do we believe the Words of Jesus are the Words of Jesus no matter how they are conveyed? Of course. Do the Words of Jesus get short-circuited as they pass through the internet? Of course not."¹²

However, the issue is not with the efficacy of God's Word. Most pastors would heartily concur in the power and efficacy of God's Word regardless of the audible means with which it is spoken. Rather, the point of difference comes when we consider the ordinance and institution of the Lord's Supper along with the efficacy of the Word of God. As was noted above, there are some limiting factors about the edible Word (the Lord's Supper) that should be considered as part of this debate, particularly over and against the audible Word of God.

Ordinance and Institution

Scripture is replete with instances of God speaking His Word across space and time for His people, yet there always seems to be a physicality linked to it, including the shedding of blood. Ultimately, the new covenant God made was fulfilled by the physical incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ. In His physical body, He bore the sins of all humankind and shed His blood and gave His life for our redemption. It was in the Holy Supper He instituted on the night when He was betrayed that He left for His followers an incarnate last will and testament to be celebrated for all time. A thorough understanding of the *ordinance* and *institution* of the Lord's Supper is essential to any discussion about online home Communion.

¹¹ "A Counter Opinion: Why We Can Celebrate Online Communion with Confidence," Greg Finke, April 6, 2020: <https://dwelling114.org/blog/2020/4/6/a-counter-opinion-why-we-can-celebrate-online-communion-with-confidence>

¹² Ibid.

First, let's explore what is meant by ordinance and institution. To clarify, "ordinance" refers to the mandate, context, and setting of the supper, while "institution" denotes the specific elements and words used by the Lord to establish this sacred meal. Of particular interest will be whether or not the physical assembly of Christians is meant to be a part of the ordinance of the Last Supper, and if so, does a setting like we are currently experiencing constitute an emergency, necessitating that we set that requirement aside? The place to begin this discussion is, of course, with Christ's institution of His Supper.

The Last Will and Testament of Jesus

It is generally agreed that Jesus Christ gave the Words of Institution as His last will (*διαθήκη*) and testament. This is concluded from His own words, "this cup is the new testament in my blood" (Luke 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25), as well as it being His "Last Supper" before His death on the cross. Consequently, the nature of His words as a testament and will (*διαθήκη*) are pertinent to understanding the mandate and ordinance of His Supper.¹³ With this understanding of *testament* clearly in mind, we will examine what Christ intended for His followers to continue doing when He said, "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:24-25). To begin our discussion, Lutheran reformer Martin Chemnitz highlights this perspective of Christ's last will and testament on more than one occasion.

From his *Enchiridion*:

In the night in which he was betrayed, Christ instituted and ordained His most holy Supper in the form of His last will. Now, it is a violation of civil law, in fact a crime, if someone wrests and twists the testament of a good and honest man beyond and contrary to its meaning. It is a very much greater and [more] grievous offense to do anything to the testament of the Son of God by changing or perverting its words, especially since Paul says: 'He that does not discern the body of the Lord,' of which the words of the Supper speak, 'eats and drinks judgment to himself,' 1 Co 11:29.¹⁴

From His Work, *The Lord's Supper*:

Scripture itself uses this argument, that the comparison of a secular will with the last will and testament of God shows that what is legitimate and God pleasing in the case of a man's will ought to be observed with even more piety in the case of the will and testament of the Son of God...Therefore, when the words are clear and sure, we must in no wise depart from them but rather take them in their proper, natural, and preferred meaning.¹⁵

Thus, understanding Christ's institution and ordinance from the perspective of His last will and testament is foundational in determining how His Supper is to be celebrated. In general, LCMS Lutherans hold that the Lord's Supper is to be administered according to the manner Jesus intended (ordinance) and administered with the elements that He established (instituted), all with the meaning and intent of those precious gifts—the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation—being affected by their right administration.

¹³ For further illumination outside the scope of this paper but central to understanding *διαθήκη*, see Clancy, Robert "The Old Testament roots of Remembrance in the Lords Supper." *Concordia Journal* 19 (1993) 35-50, esp. p.47.

¹⁴ Chemnitz, Martin. *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*. Translated by Luther Poellot. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1983, p.123

¹⁵ *The Lord's Supper*. trans. J.A. O. Preus. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1979 p.83.

Scriptural Clarity Regarding Christ's Ordinance and Institution

A brief scriptural examination will be helpful to understand more clearly the ordinance and institution of the Lord's Supper. To that end, there is no better portion of Scripture to use in a sacramental discussion than the one that settled the first sacramental controversy for the Christians at Corinth. In fact, 20th-century Lutheran Herman Sasse is quite enthusiastic about using Paul's first letter to the Corinthians to address any debate on the Sacrament.

It may be a consolation to our generation that the controversies on the Lord's Supper are as old as the church. However, this does not diminish the tragedy that the sacrament of the one body of Christ has been and is the occasion of disunity and divisions between those who by one Spirit have been baptized into one body (1 Cor 12:13). Nor does it relieve us from the duty to do our utmost to overcome our divisions, not by human compromise, but by humbly submitting to that authority which once settled the first sacramental controversy at Corinth, the Word of Christ as it comes to us in the apostolic witness of the New Testament.¹⁶

Paul's letter to the Corinthians reveals important information about how the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated. It affirms all the important features of the Lord's institution, as well as significant insights to what it means to follow the ordinance of the Lord in His Supper. In other words, Paul's letter illumines the importance for proper intent (which relates to ordinance), and proper practices (which relate to institution). It demonstrates that the ordinance of Christ presupposes the meaning that He gave to the words He spoke at His Last Supper "on the night when he was betrayed" (1 Cor. 11:23).

The specific texts to be examined are 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:17-34. A detailed exegetical treatment falls outside the scope of this paper. Rather, we will explore the significant details that a proper exegesis reveals. My translations from the Greek are provided below, followed by an analysis pertaining to the ordinance and institution of the Lord's Supper:

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

14Therefore my beloved, flee from idolatry. 15I speak as to wise ones (people). You judge what I say. 16The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation¹⁷ in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17Because there is one bread, we many are one body, for we all share the one bread. 18Look at Israel according to the flesh, are not the ones eating the sacrifices participants in the altar? 19What, therefore, am I saying? That meat sacrificed

¹⁶ Sasse, "Consecration and Real Presence (1957)" p.272.

¹⁷ There is varied discussion about what word to use that best renders what Paul is expressing in this verse: Lockwood notes that BADG, 4, has a long discussion of κοινωνία in 1 Cor. 10:16 under "participation, sharing, τινος in something and suggests the meaning here of 'the common possession or enjoyment of something.'" However, Lockwood goes on to note that "because of the eucharistic context, the word in our ecclesiastical language that is the most accurate and precise here is 'communion.' Christ's body and blood are truly present in Holy Communion." *Concordia Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. St. Louis MO: Concordia 2000. p.338. Additionally, Elingworth and Hatton note that, "The difference between participation and 'communion' is that participation means 'sharing' with one another, while 'communion' focuses on the relation between the believer and Christ, which is certainly also involved. The following verse suggests that Paul is thinking mainly about the union of Christians with one another. However, the idea of participation is also required by the reference to Christ's blood and body. Perhaps one could combine these ideas as Barret does: 'a common participation in the body of Christ.'; GECL translates more fully: 'Think of the communion cup over which we speak the prayers of thanksgiving. Does it not enable us to share in the blood that Christ poured out for us?'" *A Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1994, p.226-7. Finally, Lenski renders it "communion" but explains that "'Communion', κοινωνία with the genitive of the object denotes actual participation in the blood of Christ, i.e. the blood shed on the cross for the remission of our sins." *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963, p.409.

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to idols is something or that an idol is something? 20(No) but that which they sacrifice (is) to demons and not sacrificed to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot share in the table of the Lord and the table of demons. 22Or are we trying to provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

17But in giving this instruction to you I do not praise (you) because your coming together is not to the better but for the worse. 18For first of all when you come together for church I hear division exists among you and a certain part I believe. 19It is necessary for divisions to be among you in order that the approved become known among you. 20Therefore, when you come together at the same place, it is not¹⁸ to eat the Lord's Supper. 21For each eats his own supper before hand, also one is hungry another is drunk. 22For do you not have houses to eat and to drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I praise you? In this I will not praise you. 23For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was handed over took bread 24and having given thanks he broke it and said, this is my body which is for you, this do in the remembrance of me. 25In the same way also the cup after the supper, saying this cup (is) the new testament in my blood. This do as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. 26For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, the death of the Lord you proclaim until he comes. 27Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily, he shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28But a person must examine himself and thus eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29For the one who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself when not distinguishing the body. 30On account of this many among you are without strength and are weak and not a few have fallen asleep. 31But if we examine ourselves, we would not be undergoing judgment. 32But while we are being judged by the Lord we are being disciplined, in order that we might not be judged with the world. 33Therefore my brothers when you come together to eat wait for each other. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, in order that you do not come together for judgment. The remaining things I shall settle when I come.

Analysis

For Lutherans, the above texts leave no doubt that the true “body and blood” of Christ (του σωματος και του αιματος του κυριου) are present by the institution of the Lord. However, what do these texts offer by way of understanding Christ's ordinance for how this meal is to be administered and celebrated?

To begin, it's helpful to note the intention of the physically gathered Corinthians. From the text in 1 Corinthians 11, it becomes apparent that they intended to physically gather for the purpose of eating a meal of some kind. But what kind of meal did they intend to gather together for? Here the significance and relationship of 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 become vitally important in understanding Paul's treatment of the Lord's Supper.

1 Corinthians 10 begins with an admonition by Paul for the Corinthians to flee idolatry. Lutheran exegete Jeff Gibbs notes, “In this context, the statements of Paul about the Lord's Supper (as well as those about Israel's sacrifices and those of the idol shrines) are used to validate the command to flee idolatry. Paul's statements assume the realities involved, rather than arguing them.”¹⁹ Chemnitz explains it this way:

We must particularly and diligently note that it is from what they had previously learned and known that Paul wants the Corinthians to judge what he says in 1 Cor. 10 concerning the communion of the body of Christ. But when had they learned this? Doubtless from the words of institution which Paul had previously taught the Corinthians as the proper foundation for this dogma. Thus in the statement in 1 Cor. 10 Paul is not trying to lead us away from the words of institution, as though the dogma of the Lord's Supper cannot be clearly set forth or understood on the basis of these words as our adversaries do. But he is subordinating this statement in 1 Cor. 10 to the words of institution; he even wants it to be judged by them. Therefore the passage in 1 Cor. 10 must be interpreted, understood, and judged on the basis of the words of institution and not vice versa.²⁰

¹⁸ denotes purpose – “it is not for the purpose of”

¹⁹ Gibbs, Jeff. “An exegetical Case for Close(d) Communion: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; 11:17-34.” *The Concordia Journal* vol. 21. April, 1995 p. 148-163, p.150.

²⁰ *The Lord's Supper* p. 139.

Paul uses the Lord's Supper to demonstrate that the Corinthians cannot participate in both the cup/table (ποτη ριοντραπε ζηφ) of the Lord and the cup/table of demons because they are diametrically opposed realities. Eating from meat sacrificed to idols is not something one who eats of the "body" and "blood" of the Lord does. It creates conflict and is idolatry. "To try to combine them in one life is to invite the jealous wrath and power of the Lord (10:21-22)."²¹

Thus, to counter their idolatrous tendencies, Paul stresses the reality of the Corinthians physically assembling expressly to eat the Lord's Supper, where they understand His body and blood to be truly present and received for the forgiveness of sins. Though these verses do not deal directly with the details of their communal practice of the celebration, they nonetheless prepare the way for Paul's coming emphasis on Christ's institution of the Supper in 1 Corinthians 11.

After Paul made use of the Lord's Supper in reminding the Corinthians who they are by their celebration of it, he then turns toward their disturbing practices of celebrating the Lord's Supper that are causing Paul great concern (11:17). Specifically, he informs them that, "when you come together at the same place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper" (11:20).

Note, Paul is not saying here that the Corinthians are not celebrating the Lord's Supper when they gather because of their practices. That would seem to contradict what he just established in chapter 10. Rather, this verse must be understood in terms of the misuse of the Lord's Supper and not a lack of it entirely. As fellow Lutheran exegete Gregory Lockwood notes: "When the Corinthians gathered, their intent was 'to eat,' to have the communal meal followed by the Lord's Supper, but Paul is saying that they were *not* gathering for the purpose of celebrating the Lord's Supper *in the way the Lord intended*."²² Gibbs articulates it this way:

"In verse 20, Paul states that their divisions were effectively turning them away from the very purpose of their gathering together for worship. Verse 20 cannot mean, 'your divisions are preventing the Lord's Supper from actually being celebrated.' For their sin is against the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament (v.27). Rather, by their divisions and sins against one another, they indicate that their 'true intention' is really anything but "to eat the Lord's Supper." They are more intent, as Paul writes in the next verse with biting irony, on eating 'their own supper' (v.21)."²³

Thus, though the Corinthians had the intention of recognizing the Lord's body and blood in the Supper, they were in fact not recognizing it because of their divisions.²⁴ Although the Corinthians were celebrating the Lord's Supper according to the institution of the Lord, they were not celebrating it the way the Lord had intended (ordinance). Some were eating before others even arrived (their lack of physical presence was a concern for Paul). As a result, Paul returns to the institution and ordinance that Christ gave when He first celebrated the Supper with His disciples: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you..." (1 Cor. 11:23, ff.).

The impact of Paul using the words of institution is accented by, but not dependent upon, his earlier reference to the Lord's Supper in chapter 10. The hearers and readers of the letter could not miss the connection between the words of Christ that Paul quotes in chapter 11 and his earlier use of the Lord's Supper in chapter 10: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we many are one body, for we all share the one

²¹ Gibbs p.152.

²² Lockwood, p.381.

²³ Gibbs, p.155.

²⁴ As an aside, the Corinthian problem too often seems to be the situation in our churches today. Sure, we confess the presence of Christ's body and blood and feel comfortable going up to the table of the Lord while at the same time refusing to be reconciled to our neighbor whom we offended and is up at the table of the Lord with us!

bread" (10:16-17). Reading the two texts together as a whole therefore becomes extremely helpful in understanding the ordinance and institution of Christ's Supper.

From this letter, one can determine that the Corinthians were indeed intending to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Yet they were abusing the Supper. Their problem was in that they were not celebrating it according to the institution and ordinance of the Lord. As a result, Paul admonishes them with warnings about the Lord's judgement upon those who misuse the Lord's Supper and do not recognize the Lord's body among all who had physically gathered together in that place.

Implications

There are significant implications that can be drawn from this study. Would it be fair to conclude that the proper intention to celebrate the Lord's Supper is foundational for right practice and administration of it? Namely, must the purpose of each celebration be for the physical gathering and reception of His body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, wherein those who are physically present and participate in that communal meal are made one in and through the body of Christ, and wherein what Christ instituted has been followed and obeyed (i.e., Words of Institution, bread, wine)? Irrespective of circumstances, answers to these questions have historically been in the affirmative for Lutherans, as I will demonstrate below.

However, as Paul noted, abuses of this Supper can occur even amid such proper intentions. This happens when the purpose of the Lord's Supper is distorted, and Christians fail to examine (δοκιμαζέτω) themselves before partaking. Gibbs sums it up by explaining:

In this text, Paul teaches that to commune unworthily means three things. First, unworthy communing takes place when Christians commune while abusing the horizontal relationship between Christians, or when the abuse is ignored and tolerated. Second, unworthy communing takes place when the Sacraments' very purpose – to sustain the unity of the members of the one body – is also ignored. Third, unworthy communing occurs when the reality of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament are overtly or implicitly denied.²⁵

What is significant for the purposes of this paper is the centrality of proper intentions and context (ordinance) for properly celebrating the Lord's Supper. This was an issue for the Apostle Paul that went beyond the efficacy of God's Word. The Corinthians had the intention to celebrate the Supper as the Lord gave it, but their actions demonstrated their failure to do so. They were certainly employing the Words of Jesus and having the Lord's Supper. But Paul criticized their lack of understanding about the Lord's Supper in its entirety. The Word of Christ certainly was to remain central; their issue was not in the misuse of the Lord's Word, but of the Supper itself. According to Paul, they were not rightly administering it.

Luther likewise gives clarity to the understanding of the Lord's Supper being rightly administered in his 1528 sermon on the catechism:

Christ does not found his sacrament upon our use of it, what he says or ordains remains, no matter whether one uses it rightly or wrongly. The sacrament is body and blood, as the words say, whether it is received by one who is worthy or unworthy...If the sacrament is rightly administered, one should preach, first, that the sacrament is the body and blood of the Lord under the bread and wine, as the words say. Secondly, the benefit: it effects the forgiveness of sins, as the words say, 'which is shed for the remission of sins.'²⁶

²⁵ Gibbs, p.161.

²⁶ Luther's 1528 sermon on the catechism. Dillenberger, John ed. *Martin Luther: Selections from his writings*. New York: Double Day, 1962 p.235-236.

Here, then, it appears that the Lord's Supper is rooted in more than just the efficacy of God's Word, but also to following Christ's ordinance and institution. We might then ask, what therefore efficaciously consecrates the body and blood of Christ and creates the environment for reception of Christ's body and blood (by both worthy and unworthy alike)? From the lessons learned at Corinth, it seems to be the efficacy of the Word (institution) combined with Christ's ordinance.

Similar Debates from our Past

In fact, this is what our Confessions point us to as well. The authors of the *Formula of Concord* were dealing with a sacramental controversy when they crafted Article VII, The Holy Supper, of the *Solid Declaration*. In short, the issues that spurred the development of the *Solid Declaration* went beyond just the controversies with the Romanists. It was also aimed at the "Enthusiasts" who claimed that they celebrated the Lord's Supper but asserted that there was no presence of Christ's body and blood in, with, or under the bread and wine at the celebration. For them, the Word of God produced a spiritual presence of the Lord among the assembly, but not a real or sacramental presence of the Lord. Such claims prompted the authors of the *Solid Declaration* to write the following:

To maintain this true Christian doctrine concerning the Holy Supper and to obviate and eliminate many kinds of idolatrous misuse and perversion of this testament, the following useful rule and norm has been derived from the words of institution: Nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ, or apart from the divinely instituted action (that is, if one does not observe Christ's institution as he ordained it, it is no sacrament). This rule dare not in any way be rejected, but it can be and should be profitably urged and retained in the church of God. In this context "use" or "action" does not primarily mean faith, or oral eating alone, but the entire external and visible action of the Supper as ordained by Christ: the consecration or words of institution, the distribution and reception, or the oral eating of the blessed bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ. Apart from this use it is not to be deemed a sacrament...²⁷

One phrase in particular is rather insightful: "the entire external and visible action of the Supper as ordained by Christ." This appears to clarify what is included in the ordinance of Christ. Even more is this phrase: "the distribution and reception, or the oral eating of the blessed bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ." This, too, offers further clarity. In this case, it shows that the manner of distribution and reception are essentially not negotiable.

In short, it all hinges around what is actually being received in Holy Communion. While other protestants view the "blessed bread and wine" as a memorial meal of a purely spiritual or symbolic nature, Lutherans understand they are receiving the real "body and blood of Christ" as well. We believe, teach, and confess that in the Holy Supper, Christians receive with their mouths under bread and wine the very body and blood born of Mary, crucified, died, and raised again for our salvation. This "oral eating" of the body and blood of Christ, as the Formula confesses it, is no virtual reality in other words.

Accordingly, understanding the 16th-century debate about the Lord's Supper can help us better address the current 21st-century debate. In fact, it's in our own Confessions written during this time that we're provided the formal framework to examine the Lord's Supper in terms of its institution and ordinance.

²⁷ *Book of Concord*; Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VII 85-86, "The Lord's Supper". Tappert, p. 584.

Luther and the Confessions

Luther in his Large Catechism stresses the significance of Christ's Words of Institution. He emphasizes their efficacy, but also their use as the Lord Jesus intended them to be used. This included the setting, intent, and content of the Last Supper:

10 It is the Word, I maintain, which distinguishes it from mere bread and wine and constitutes it as a sacrament which is rightly called Christ's body and blood. It is said, "*accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*," that is, "When the Word is joined to the external element, it becomes a sacrament"...

11 The Word must make the element a sacrament; otherwise it remains a mere element. Now, this is not the word and ordinance of a prince or emperor, but of the divine Majesty at whose feet every knee should bow and confess that it is as he says and should accept it with all reverence, fear, and humility...

13 Here we have Christ's word, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' 'Drink of it, all of you, this is the new covenant in my blood,' etc. Here we shall take our stand and see who dares to instruct Christ and alter what he has spoken. It is true, indeed, that if you take the Word away from the

14 elements or view them apart from the Word, you have nothing but ordinary bread and wine. But if the words remain, as is right and necessary, then in virtue of them they are truly the body and blood of Christ. For as we have it from the lips of Christ, so it is; he cannot lie or deceive...

16 Even though a knave should receive or administer it, it is the true sacrament (that is, Christ's body and blood) just as truly as when one uses it most worthily. For it is not founded on the holiness of men but on the Word of God. As no saint on earth, yes, no angel in heaven can transform bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, so likewise no one can change or alter

17 the sacrament, even if it is misused. For the Word by which it was constituted a sacrament is not rendered false because of an individual's unworthiness or unbelief. Christ does not say, "If you believe, or if you are worthy, you receive my body and blood," but, "take, eat and drink, this is my body and blood." Likewise, he says, "Do this,' namely, what I now do, what I institute,

18 what I give you and bid you take. This is as much as to say, "No matter whether you are unworthy or worthy, you here have Christ's body and blood by virtue of these words which are 19 coupled with the bread and wine." Mark this and remember it well. For upon these words rest our whole argument, protection, and defense against all errors and deceptions that have ever arisen or may yet arise.²⁸

Luther finished writing his German (Large) Catechism in April of 1529.²⁹ It was a splendid document designed to help the unlearned clergy learn the clear truth of Scripture. A year and two months prior, Luther had completed his "Great Confession" or *Confession Concerning Christ Supper*, which was primarily intended to refute the teachings of "Enthusiasts."³⁰ In this earlier document, Luther stresses the "ordinance" and "institution" of Christ as the defining factor for the presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, which is also what caused the authors' of the Solid Declaration to include it their article The Holy Supper as well:

In the same way I also say and confess that in the Sacrament of the Altar the body and blood of Christ are truly eaten and drunk in the bread and wine, though the priests who distribute them or those who receive them do not believe or otherwise misuse the sacrament. It does not rest on man's faith or unbelief but on the Word and ordinance of God – unless they first change God's Word and ordinance and misinterpret them, as the enemies of the sacrament do at the present time. They indeed have only bread and wine, for they do not also have the word and instituted ordinance of God but have perverted and changed it according to their own imagination.³¹

²⁸ *Book of Concord*, Large Catechism, Tappert p.448.

²⁹ Tappert, p.357.

³⁰ Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works Vol 37: Word and Sacrament III*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961, p.155. Hereafter referred to American Edition (AE) 37.

³¹AE 37:367 "1528 Confession Concerning Christ's Supper"; also in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VII, The Holy Supper, 32. (Tappert p. 574).

It's helpful to note the difference between the above two documents. The earlier one carries a negative connotation, being a refutation against unhelpful or false teaching, while his later writing has a positive connotation, a catechesis given for the deeper instruction of pastors. Both are helpful in the proper understanding of the Lord's Supper.

What is more, in his opening treatment of the Lord's Supper in the Large Catechism, Luther demonstrates a similar emphasis on "ordinance" and "institution."

We have no wish on this occasion to quarrel and dispute with those who blaspheme and desecrate this sacrament; but as in the case of Baptism, we shall first learn what is of the greatest importance, namely, God's Word and ordinance or command, which is the chief thing to be considered. For the Lord's Supper was not invented or devised by any man. It was instituted by Christ without man's counsel or deliberation.³²

Juxtaposing what Luther confesses in his 1528 "Great Confession" with his 1529 *Large Catechism* proves to be advantageous for fully understanding Luther on the Lord's Supper, particularly on what constitutes the ordinance and institution of that Supper. However, as both are also a part of our official Lutheran Confessions, they give us a specific and formal framework to evaluate practices of the Lord's Supper. For the issue at hand, they provide a particular framework to utilize in our consideration of online Communion and any subsequent evaluation of the practice.

Virtual Presence = Real Presence?

As noted above, part of the online home Communion discussion includes whether the Word of God spoken through the screen 1) consecrates the elements of bread and wine disbursed across individual members' homes, 2) is in accord with Christ's institution and ordinance, and 3) is thus sufficient grounds to offer the Lord's Supper virtually. The article from *Christianity Today* puts it this way:

Yet the imagined video conference call—not so much imagined anymore—is an extension of known relationships of the local body. Why can't the signs of God's presence—the bread and wine—and the signs of our presence—our smiles and voices—signify both the goodness of the embodied world and the reality of the spiritual one? There is nothing inherently Gnostic—disembodied—here. Real bodies. Real bread. And the real presence of the Triune God, on Zoom this weekend and joyfully gathered back together in person once this too has passed.³³

This brings up some other important elements to consider in light of all the foregoing. First, and only briefly, despite the disclaimer, the core of his argument certainly has the echo of Gnosticism.³⁴ He is upholding the "spiritual" good for each independent viewer, while ignoring the loss of the physical communal gathering and the good of those incarnate gatherings.³⁵ Discarnate ministry is not how the church ordinarily operates. Second, although the writer appears to come from a Reformed theological approach, which has historically always and only

³² LC, 4. Tappert, p.447.

³³ Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental."

³⁴ Gnosticism says that humans are divine souls trapped in the ordinary physical (or material) world. They say that the world was made by an imperfect spirit. The imperfect spirit is thought to be the same as the God of Abraham. The imperfect spirit may be seen as evil, or sometimes just not perfect but doing the best it can. The real God, who is good, is distant and not easy to know. In order to get free from the material world, a person has to get gnosis. That is the special secret knowledge given only to a few special people.

³⁵ Other Gnostic tendencies from today can be seen in the devaluing of the body—the transgender and right to die movements for example—that stress greater meaning to the inner expression of how one feels rather than the actual physicality and truths of the physical body.

confessed the Lord's Supper as a spiritual meal, he nonetheless presses his argument among "real presence" Lutherans and others who assert the efficacy of God's Word as the exclusive necessity for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated online. As Lutheran pastor Greg Finke asserts: "One may ask, 'How can congregations have confidence they are receiving the Lord's Supper online?' Simple. They believe what all Lutherans are taught: '...and he that believes these words has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins.' The congregation hears Jesus' Words; believes what He offers with the bread and wine; and then eats and drinks."³⁶

However, as noted above, the edible Word of the Lord is unique; it operates with more requirements of reception than the audible Word. It has an incarnate rather than discarnate context to it. Even so, we must consider how this argumentation can run the risk of reducing the Words of Institution to a mere magical formula or incantation. This concern would remain true whether or not someone is in favor of online home Communion. That is to say, the danger comes in one of two ways. First, the notion that a pastor has the power to consecrate the elements based upon the "office" he is in, where all that is needed is the mere recitation of a certain set of words no matter what the setting. Second, the other danger is the notion that any one person or group of people might merely recite the Words of Institution themselves, or simultaneously with the pastor's remote speaking, and so consecrate the elements by the mere formulaic repetition of those words. The concern is that it would make Christ's Words into a magic formula that, independent of Christ's ordinance, suffices for proper administration of the Lord's Supper.

Of course, all such ideas of "magic" are to be avoided. The word magic "taken in its strict sense, implies the idea of a compulsion exercised by man over the deity."³⁷ This is certainly not what Luther was contending when he said:

Though I spoke the words, 'This is my Body,' over all breads, it would of course effect nothing. But when, following His institution and command, we say in the Lord's Supper, 'This is My body,' then it is His body, not because of our speaking or effective word, but because of His command, that He has enjoined us so to speak and to do, and bound His command and action to our speaking.³⁸

Other Lutheran Voices

Herman Sasse similarly states it well when he says: "According to the Lutheran church the words of institution are consecratory, i.e. effecting the Real Presence of the body of Christ, solely because they are the words of Christ which are today as powerful as in the first institution if spoken by the properly called minister who speaks them as the mouthpiece of Christ and not as a pri[est] endowed with *a potestas offerendi pro vivis et defunctis*."³⁹ Thus he, too, stresses the importance of Christ's institution and ordinance as the effective power behind the words of consecration.

Similarly, 17th century Lutheran Johann Gerhard says:

We do not, however, ascribe to the recital of the words of institution the power to cause the presence of Christ's body and blood through an occult power inhering in the words...But we certainly confess that the presence of Christ's body and blood depends solely and entirely on the will and promise of Christ and on the perpetual effectiveness of the first institution; however we nevertheless add that the repetition of that original institution, done by the servant of the church in

³⁶"A Counter Opinion: Why We Can Celebrate Online Communion with Confidence," Greg Finke, April 6, 2020, <https://dwelling114.org/blog/2020/4/6/a-counter-opinion-why-we-can-celebrate-online-communion-with-confidence>

³⁷ Sasse, Hermann. "Consecration and Real Presence (1957)." In *Scripture and Church: Selected essays of Hermann Sasse*. eds. Jeffrey Kloha and Ronald Feuerhahn. St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1995, p.306.

³⁸ AE 37:184, "1528 Confession Concerning Christ's Supper." Also in the Solid Declaration, VII, The Holy Supper, 78 (Tappert p.583-4).

³⁹ Sasse, "Consecration and Real Presence (1957).", p.308.

The Ordinance and Institution of the Lord's Supper

the administration of the Eucharist, is not merely historical and doctrinal, but also consecratory, by which, in agreement with Christ's ordination, the eternal symbols are truly and effectively designated for the holy use, so that in the distribution itself they are the communion (κοινωνία) of the body and blood of Christ...⁴⁰

By this non-magical understanding of the words of consecration, Lutherans not only emphasize Christ's ordinance and institution in the proper celebration of the Lord's Supper, but also provide a clearer perspective regarding the man in the Office of the Holy Ministry. As Lutheran scholar Edmund Schlink states:

The church does not *transfer* its office of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments to individuals in its membership, but it *fills* this office entrusted to it by God, it *calls* into this office instituted by God. In this office the pastor therefore acts in the name and at the direction of God and in the stead of *Jesus Christ*. He acts with authority not on the basis of an arrangement made by believers but on the basis of the divine institution.⁴¹

Accordingly, through the ordinance and institution as the Lord gave it, His people continue to receive His gifts of body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. LCMS Lutheran father Francis Pieper stresses the importance of this understanding for congregations wishing to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

It is imperative therefore that the congregation unmistakably declare at every celebration of the Lord's Supper that its intention is to celebrate the Supper instituted by Christ, or, in other words, that it would repeat the act ordained by Christ. This declaration the congregation makes by consecrating the elements ordained by Christ, namely, bread and wine, for use in the Lord's Supper. Consecration is correctly defined as the act whereby bread and wine are detached from their ordinary use and appointed to the use in the Lord's Supper, that is, are set apart to this end, that with the bread, according to Christ's promise, the body of Christ and with the wine, according to Christ's promise, the blood of Christ be received.⁴²

Likewise in Formula of Concord, the Reformers underscore the consecration of the sacramental elements by the called servant of the congregation using the words of Christ's institution (either spoken or sung) as essential for the valid administration of the Lord's Supper, in one continuous action consisting in taking, consecration, distribution, reception (eating/drinking) as a matter of obedience to His divine command: "Do this."

⁷⁹ In the administration of Communion the words of institution are to be spoken or sung distinctly and clearly before the congregation and are under no circumstances to be omitted.

⁸⁰ Thereby we render obedience to the command of Christ, 'This do.'

⁸¹ Thereby the faith of the hearers in the essence and benefits of this sacrament (the presence of the body and blood of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits which Christ has won for us by his death and the shedding of his blood and which he gives to us in his testament) is awakened, strengthened, and confirmed through his Word.

⁸² And thereby the elements of bread and wine are hallowed or blessed in this holy use, so that therewith the body and blood of Christ are distributed to us to eat and to drink, as Paul says, "The cup of blessing which we bless," which happens precisely through the repetition and recitation of the words of institution.

⁸³ But this blessing or recitation of Christ's words of institution by itself, if the entire action of the Lord's Supper as Christ ordained it is not observed (if, for instance, the blessed bread is not distributed, received, and eaten but is locked up, offered up, or carried about), does not make a sacrament.

⁴⁰ Found in Pieper, p.368, the quote itself is a translation from Gerhard's *Loci, De coena*, 151.

⁴¹ Schlink, Edmund, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehnke and Herbert J.A. Bouman. Philadelphia: Mulenberg Press, 1961, p.245.

⁴² Pieper, p.366.

⁸⁴ But the command of Christ, "Do this," which comprehends the whole action or administration of this sacrament (namely, that in a Christian assembly we take bread and wine, consecrate it, distribute it, receive it, eat and drink it, and therewith proclaim the Lord's death), must be kept integrally and inviolately, just as St. Paul sets the whole action of the breaking of bread, or of the distribution and reception, before our eyes in 1 Cor. 10:16. [FC SD VII (79-84)]⁴³

Suffice it to say, Lutherans have much to say about what constitutes the ordinance and institution of the Lord's Supper.

Conclusion

What does all this offer as we contemplate the proposal of celebrating Communion in an online manner? If one compares the idea of online Communion to the ordinance and institution issues present with the Corinthians, likewise, with those established in our Lutheran confessions, the contrast is illuminating.

Online home Communion has, at its core, the desire to serve the Lord's people with the profound gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, which our Lord promises to give in His Supper. We must all rejoice in this sincere desire. Even so, we must also still objectively evaluate if online administration of Holy Communion is possible according to both the ordinance and institution of the Lord Himself. As such, given online Communion's virtual and discarnate context, though it implements the completely efficacious Word of God in the Words of Institution, it appears to omit adherence to the Lord's mandate for a proper setting given the absence of a corporate physical gathering of one size or another.

To elaborate, Paul begins his admonishment of the Corinthians with the following words from 1 Cor. 11:17: "But in giving this instruction to you I do not praise (you) because your coming together is not to the better but for the worse." Paul notes and then criticizes their "coming together." In short, they were physically gathering in a Christian assembly to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Without that physical gathering, Paul would not see such a meal being able to take place. His criticism is based upon their inhospitable practices of gathering together, particularly regarding with selfish intentions and lack of discernment about the body of Christ. What is more, even though Paul extols the transcendent and unbounded power of Christ's Word in this letter (as well as many others), his emphasis on the physical gathering explicitly demonstrates that an assembly of believers is what he understands as necessary for this meal. In sum, it appears that the real presence of fellow Christians physically gathering together is as much a part of Christ's ordinance for the supper as is understanding the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the bread and wine.

It's with this understanding about the ordinance and institution of the Lord's Supper that the authors of the Formula of Concord decided to make use of Luther's "Great Confession" and incorporate it into Article VII (The Holy Supper) of the *Solid Declaration*:

[T]he command of Christ, 'Do this,' which comprehends the whole action or administration of this sacrament (namely, that in a Christian assembly we take bread and wine, consecrate it, distribute it, receive it, eat and drink it, and therewith proclaim the Lord's death), must be kept integrally and inviolately, just as St. Paul sets the whole action of the breaking of bread or of the distribution and reception, before our eyes in 1 Cor. 10:16.⁴⁴

⁴³ Tappert, T. G. (Ed.). (1959). [*The Book of Concord the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*](#). (p. 584). Philadelphia: Mühlenberg Press.

⁴⁴ SD VII, 84. Tappert p.584.

All of the foregoing discussion on the Scriptures, Confessions, and collegial, faithful pastoral practice invites caution regarding administering the Lord's Supper in any online manner. At a minimum, the lack of a physical gathering (the Christian assembly) poses a problem to adhering to the Lord's ordinance for this meal. Even if the pastor practices digital close(d) Communion and looks to carefully implement this online practice while trusting in the efficacious nature of the Word of God, the ordinance of Christ remains paramount.

As we wrestle with our quarantined pandemic settings that prevent the physical gathering of our Christian assemblies, we must also wrestle with what the Lord's ordinance and institution for His supper mean for the life of the Church while in quarantine. The digital age may have made some people comfortable with the idea that "digital culture has shaped our interactions to the point that human presence is not synonymous to physicality" and therefore, "being present doesn't require being in person"—whatever that may mean.⁴⁵ But based on this study, this would be a concept that appears totally foreign to the Supper our Lord gave as His enduring will and testament.

In the end, our situation is not ideal. Fasting from the Lord's Supper for a season is not desirable. Yet, if we cannot partake of His Supper according to His ordinance and institution, does fasting become our only alternative? Or can emergencies make room for omitting the ordinance of the Lord's Supper?

True, the Word of God is essential for the means of grace. Without it, God has chosen not to reveal Himself or deliver His grace and forgiveness. Thus, the church cannot live without the audible Word of God. It must be present for faith, life, and salvation. Even more, the emergency example from Augustine above also shows how the watered Word (baptism) can be administered in an emergency setting. Yet, even then, the emergency setting he uses adheres to the regular ordinance and institution of the Lord, where nothing is altered in terms of how and with what it is delivered. Rather, the only change from the usual manner of administration is in who administers it. Ordinarily it is the pastor. But the emergency is that death is at hand, and no pastor is present. As such, one can't refrain from what one would normally do in this emergency situation. A new believer is normally baptized and brought to faith, and a baptized Christian is normally absolved of sin, both for the assurance of life and salvation. Therefore, exceptions are made from normal practice for these two forms of the Word of God.

However, is there ever a situation where an emergency would dictate that the Lord's Supper must be administered? Specifically, that without administering it in some form, one's salvation would not be assured before death? Respectfully, such situations are difficult to imagine, particularly since faith is kindled and nurtured by the audible Word and watered Word (baptism), which are also ordinarily required precursors to celebrate the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27, ff.).

Consequently, if it is true that no life or death emergency of this kind exists for the Lord's Supper, it should give us further pause in considering online home Communion. However, the claim of what constitutes an emergency regarding the Lord's Supper remains unsettled at this point in our LCMS circles.⁴⁶ There are those in the history of the Lutheran church who have

⁴⁵ Chris Ridgeway, "Online Communion Can Still Be Sacramental: The Bread and the Cup Zoomed for you," from Christianity Today, which advocates for online communion: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/online-communion-can-still-be-sacramental.html>

⁴⁶ There are competing Lutheran quotes being batted about regarding the nature of such emergencies. All of which are quotes simply compiled by C. F. W. Walther in his book *The Church & The Office of the Ministry*, (CPH: 2012). The first quote below is from Luther speaking against home communion, followed by others with opinions in favor of it in emergency circumstances. Walther often compiles massive amounts of quotes, often without providing much commentary one way or the other, which can at times be confusing. Fortunately, theological opinions, regardless of who says them, do not bind LCMS pastors unless they are actually from our official Confessions contained in the Book of Concord. Nonetheless, the quotes follow below:

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opined that emergencies do afford for someone other than a pastor to administer the Lord's Supper. However, it must be noted that such espoused emergencies refer to contexts where Christians are separated from a congregation, where no pastor is available, or where no faithful pastor is available. This would be different than our current pandemic setting, where congregations are caring for their members and good and faithful pastors are certainly available, but where congregations and pastors are willingly complying with the government's restriction on gatherings of no more than 10 people.

Please understand, I am not, nor would I ever, encourage people to stay away from the Lord's Supper. It is a profound and wonderful gift. It is the medicine of immortality, a meal like no other. Luther compares it to when a wolf eats a lamb, noting that the lamb ordinarily becomes part of the wolf. But with the Lord's Supper, he reminds us that it's the other way around. The power of this meal is that Christ gives Himself to us. Far be it from me to counsel anyone away from it.

Rather, the point is, if in order to remain faithful to Christ's ordinance and institution of His Supper, a fast is the only unavoidable option, we would not be left as orphans or lacking in God's grace. To be sure, the power of His Word remains powerful and effective (Heb. 4:12). It

Luther (1536): "Grace and peace in Christ. Reverend and beloved pastor [Wolfgang Brauer]: This is my reply to the question that your good friend at Linz, Sigmund Hangreuter, has submitted to you in writing with the request that it may be sent to me. Kindly tell your dear sir and friend that he is not in duty bound to go ahead in this matter and commune himself and his household. Nor is this necessary, since he has neither call nor command to do so. And if the tyrannical ministers of the church will not administer it to him and his family, though they are in duty bound 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, as now the people are strange and the devil is raging. The first Christians, mentioned in Acts, did not administer the Sacrament individually [*insonderheit*] in the houses, but they came together. And though they might have done it, such an example is not longer to be followed today, just today it is not reasonable that we let all goods be shared communally as they used to do. For now the Gospel is spread throughout the world [*offentlich*], with the Sacraments. But if a father wishes to teach the Word of God to his family, that is right and should be done, for it is God's mandate that we should teach and bring up our children and household; that is commanded to everyone. But the Sacrament is a public confession and should have public ministers, because, as Christ says, we should do it in remembrance of Him; that is, as St. Paul explains it, we should show forth or preach the Lord's death till He comes [cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26]. And here [Paul] also says that we should come together, and he severely rebukes those who, each in his own way, use the Lord's Supper individually. On the other hand, it is not forbidden but rather commanded that everyone individually should instruct his household in God's Word, as well as himself, though no one should baptize himself, etc. For there is a great difference between a public office in the church and [the office of] a father in his household. Hence the two must neither be mingled into each other nor be separated from each other. Since there is neither an emergency nor a call here, we must do nothing out of our own devotion without God's definite mandate, for no good will come from it." p.163.

Walther later quotes others who seem to say the opposite, but who do yet qualify the limitations of such emergencies: "[Tilemann] Heshusius answers the question of whether a layman who has not been called into the common ministry of the Church [*gemeinen Kirckendienst*] may, in an emergency, absolve penitent sinners, baptize, and administer the Holy Supper of Christ as follows: 'There can be no doubt that in an emergency, when no duly called minister of the church can be obtained, every Christian has the power and is permitted, according to God's Word and out of Christian love, to attend to the ministry of the Church by preaching the divine Word and administering the sacraments... I am not saying that two or three Christians should separate themselves from the true Church, avoid the properly placed preachers, and cause factions, but I say this of emergency cases when either there are no preachers or those who exist spread false doctrine and so must be avoided. In addition, there is also the emergency that one cannot seek use of the Sacraments in other places. In such cases, every Christian, with the consent of two or three, is authorized and justified to administer the sacraments and strengthen the weak in the peril of death...' p.276-7.

"Balthasar Meisner: 'Whenever there is an emergency, there the general order ceases. The order does not rule over the Sacrament but serves it. The order exists for the sake of the Sacraments; the Sacraments do not exist for the sake of the order.'" p.282

gives ample comfort and solace, forgiveness and hope, wisdom and courage. Instead, perhaps this is simply a reminder that a season of fasting has occurred within the long history of the Holy Christian Church, and it may have unfortunately come again, given what we are being told about the potential of further pandemics. Pieper captures it well:

[T]here is no absolute necessity of the Lord's Supper, because the remission of sins is not divided among the various means of grace, but each one of them offers the full remission of sins provided by Christ's *satisfaction vicaria* and works, or strengthens, faith. All means of grace have the same purpose and the same effect. Hence, he who believes the preached or written word of the gospel is, through his faith in the word, in possession of the full remission of sins and salvation, though circumstances keep him from using the Lord's Supper.

Luther is right in rejecting the absolute necessity of either Baptism or the Lord's Supper. When Luther heard that Carlstadt's attacks on the Christian doctrine of the Lord's Supper had caused some Christians to doubt the Real Presence, he gave them the advice to suspend themselves from the Lord's Table during this period of doubt with this reasoning: "You are not lost if you do without the Sacrament"; "train yourselves without the Sacrament in God's word, in faith, and in love; let those take the Lord's Supper who feel safe in their conscience."⁴⁷

We are in a difficult time. But the Lord goes with us! As He has done so in the past, so will the Lord carry us through this season too. In the words of Luther's hymn:

*May Thy body, Lord, born of Mary,
That our sins and sorrows did carry,
And Thy blood for us plead
In all trial, fear, and need:
O Lord, have mercy!*⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p.392.

⁴⁸ *Lutheran Service Book*, 617 "O Lord, We Praise Thee", stz. 1b

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