

According to Christ's Institution, is Virtual Communion Holy Communion?

A. Introduction

The Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions are used here to consider the question of virtual communion. Lutherans have “the common rule that there is no sacrament outside its use according to Christ’s institution.” (SD, VII:73).¹ Therefore, the words of Christ (Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25; Lk 22:14–23) instituting Holy Communion become very important in considering this question, especially, whether virtual communion falls within or outside Christ’s institution as these very words tell us how the Sacrament should be used.

The definition of “virtual communion”: “Virtual” means participation through watching a media, such as a video recording or streaming through the internet. “Communion” is defined here in this phrase to mean Lutheran communicants prepare their own bread and wine at home, participating in the Liturgy of Holy Communion by watching through the virtual media, the pastor presiding over Holy Communion, doing the consecration at the altar of the church. The communicants’ own bread and wine is in their own home, at their own home altar and after viewing the consecration by the pastor, at their own location, they take their own bread and wine and consume it, as if they are at the same location as the pastor, who consumes the bread and wine at the altar, by himself.

B. Theological Consideration

1. **Administration:** Christ’s own words determine how Holy Communion should be administered. (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor 11:23-25). For a correct use of the Sacrament according to the gospel, the Lutheran churches base their teaching on those words of Christ as they are the testament (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25 ESV: “covenant” and KJV: “testament”) of a man about to die, therefore his words must be read as a literal institution and command to the church and not to be taken metaphorically (Heb 9:15-16). The administration of the Sacrament means the whole process of consecration, distribution and reception (refer to 4d).
 - a. Christ commissions his apostles and their successors in the apostolic ministry, for this task, of giving the means of grace for the forgiveness of sins, on his behalf (John 20:21-23). Therefore, a publicly called and ordained minister (pastor), should administer the sacrament in the Lutheran church: “Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call.” (AC 14)²

¹ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 606.

² Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 46.

- b. The minister is therefore responsible for the entire administration of the sacrament, including the preparation of the elements, the consecration, the distribution and the proper disposal of any leftovers as well as for the pastoral care of the communicants.
- c. The phrases in the words of institution: “for many” (Matthew 26:28 and Mark 14:24) and “for you” (Luke 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:24) is the gospel. These phrases also tell us that those who will benefit from the Sacrament are those who are actually eating and drinking at the moment that the Sacrament is administered when the pastor (on behalf of Christ) distributes the elements to them using a form of this phrase: “This is the body of Christ for you” and “the blood of Christ for you.”
- d. The Lutheran Confessions teaches that sacraments are the gospel made visible. What is given in the sacraments is the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, which should be preached. Therefore, preaching the gospel should precede Holy Communion. Preaching the Word (Christ) points people to the Lord’s Supper. This ensures that the Holy Communion is given correctly as gospel to those who are gathered.

Q1: Does virtual communion allow for a proper administration of the sacrament?

A1: If the pastor is in one location, and the communicants are in another location, how can the pastor, since he is given the call to administer the Sacrament, be sure that there is a proper administration happening in these other locations, according to the gospel? Since, that is in doubt, the true body and blood of Christ cannot be certain to be present.

1. **Consecration:** When the pastor says these words conflated from the scriptures during the Divine Service:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night in which he was betrayed, took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, ‘Take; eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’
 “In the same way he also took the cup after the supper, gave thanks, and gave it to them and said, ‘Take, and drink of it, all of you. This cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ ” (Luther, “Sacrament of the Altar” in *The Small Catechism*, 4).³

He is consecrating the elements of Holy Communion with these words.

³ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 362. A conflation of texts from 1 Corinthians 11:23–25; Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19f. Cf. *The Large Catechism*, “Sacrament of the Altar,” 3.

- a. The consecration is when the words of the institution of Holy Communion, the *verba testamenti* of Christ, are spoken by the pastor at the Divine Service. These words of Christ at the first Lord's Supper are efficacious for all time, that whenever it is spoken by the pastor as a representative of Christ (*in impersona Christi*), Christ unites Himself with the bread and wine and is truly present in, with and under them.
- b. The Confessions cite Luke 10:16 when they explain that the office of the ministry represents "the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies, 'The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.' When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ." (Apol VII & VIII: 28)⁴
- c. The body and blood of Christ are joined with the bread and wine in a sacramental union. Therefore, once the bread and wine are consecrated at the altar they are no longer only bread and wine and they should be respectfully treated and consumed for that is the reason for the consecration.

Q2: Does virtual communion allow for the proper consecration of the elements?

A2: Although what is efficacious is the words of institution, yet Christ himself commissions his apostles to give forgiveness or not forgive on his behalf (John 20:21-23). Pastors receive this commission as the successor of the apostolic ministry. In the case of Holy Communion, because the eating and drinking is how the communicant receives forgiveness of sins, the minister must be physically present in order to feed the elements spiritually and orally to the communicants. His virtual presence is not an embodied presence and the consecrated bread and wine which he holds, is not the same bread and wine as that which was prepared at home. Therefore, this does not constitute proper consecration of the elements and is not a good exercise of the minister's call to administer the Sacrament for the forgiveness of sins correctly. If this is so, then virtual communion does not give the body and blood of Christ, as it is not a proper consecration of the elements and therefore, no forgiveness of sins.

2. **Distribution:** The distribution of the bread and wine is part of the administration of Holy Communion according to Christ's command (Luke 22:19-20 "give it to them saying..." and 1 Cor 11:23-25 "and when he had given thanks, he broke it,...[breaking the bread is for the purpose of distribution]").
 - a. The presiding pastor is responsible for the proper distribution of the bread and wine to those who receive it in his congregation. Under his authority and supervision, he can assign communion assistants to distribute the bread and the

⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 178.

wine during the Liturgy of Holy Communion, but he alone decides who will receive and who will not receive by virtue of his office.

- b. “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor 11:27-29). What “discerning the body” means is firstly, those who are participating in communion must recognise that it is the body and blood of Christ that they are eating and drinking and they must be aware that they are coming to the Lord in repentance and yet trusting in his forgiveness offered in the bread and wine by faith. Secondly, this also means the body of Christ, fellow believers, who are participating together, they are to treat them as Christ would, their fellow sinner and so exercise mutual love for each other.
- c. In sacramental pastoral care, Lutherans teach that those who do not examine themselves with the Ten Commandments, using the two tables of the Law, in relating to God and humankind, and repent from sin are not ready to receive the Lord’s forgiveness sacramentally by faith. This preparation is part of what Luther refers to as worthy participation, for to have faith in these words “given for you” and “shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” (*The Small Catechism*, 9-10),⁵ Luther assumes one is penitent.
- d. Pastors will not give the elements to impenitent public sinners for they will then be judged by God for their impenitence. Therefore, it is important for the pastor to be present so that he can ensure that the distribution is to those who are worthy of participation as sacramental pastoral care to those who are communing.

Q3: Does virtual communion allow for the proper distribution of the elements?

A3: The inability to bring the consecrated bread and wine to every household means that the distribution of these elements is not done during virtual communion. Besides, the assumption that the bread and wine prepared by communicants at home will be consecrated virtually is without any scriptural assurance. If pastors are not physically present with the communicant, they cannot also exercise sacramental pastoral care to warn those who are not worthy, to first receive private confession and absolution before they participate, so as to come to the Sacrament with faith, wanting forgiveness. In all these ways, virtual communion does not allow for the proper distribution of the elements.

- 3. **Reception:** The Holy Communion should be consumed reverentially by the participants and whoever receives it by faith receives the benefit of the forgiveness of sins. Those who did not do so by faith will receive the body and blood of Christ nevertheless but

⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 363.

incur God’s judgement. This teaching is derived from scriptures as the Lutheran Confessions testify:

The words of Christ clearly demonstrate this, when Christ said, “take, eat, and drink,” and the apostles did this. For it is written, “and they all drank from it” (Mark 14[:23*]). Likewise, Saint Paul says, “The bread, which we break, is a Communion with the body of Christ” [1 Cor. 10:16*], that is, who eats this bread eats the body of Christ. The leading teachers of the ancient church—Chrysostom, Cyprian, Leo I, Gregory, Ambrose, Augustine, and others—unanimously testify to this (Ep VII:15).⁶

And,

For Paul expressly teaches in 1 Corinthians 11[:27*] that “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner” is sinning not only against bread and wine and not only against a sign or symbol or figure of the body and blood. Such a person is “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” Jesus Christ and dishonors, misuses, and desecrates Christ, who is present there, just as those Jews did who in fact really seized the body of Christ and put him to death. The ancient Christian Fathers and teachers of the church unanimously understood and explained this passage in this way. Paul means that not only the pious, godly, and faithful Christians but also the unworthy, godless hypocrites, such as Judas and his kind, who participate in no spiritual sharing with Christ and who go to the table of the Lord without true repentance and conversion to God, also receive the true body and blood of Christ orally in the sacrament. Thus, they sin grievously by eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ unworthily (SD VII:60).⁷

- a. This means that what communicants are receiving in their mouth are the body and blood of Christ, just as the Lutheran Confessions once again say “the body of Christ is not only received spiritually through faith, which takes place also apart from the sacrament, but also orally,...”(SD VII: 61)⁸ and this is received by both the worthy and the unworthy.
- b. But this does not mean that repentance and faith while eating the elements is what makes the Sacrament the body and blood of Christ. In the Lutheran Confessions, it is affirmed that the power that makes the bread and the wine to be not only bread and wine but also the body and blood of Christ is not our repentance nor our faith but it is the words of Christ himself:

And Luther says: ‘This command and institution of his [Jesus, our Lord] have the power to accomplish this, that we do not distribute and receive

⁶ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 506.

⁷ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 603.

⁸ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 604-5.

simply bread and wine but his body and blood, as his words indicate: ‘This is my body, this is my blood.’ So it is not our work or speaking but the command and ordinance of Christ that make the bread the body and the wine the blood, beginning with the first Lord’s Supper and continuing to the end of the world, and it is administered daily through our ministry or office.” (SD VII:77).⁹

- c. How and in what manner should the Holy Communion be received? The Lutheran Confessions say: “Indeed, in the administration of the Holy Supper the Words of Institution are to be clearly and plainly spoken or sung publicly in the congregation, and in no case are they to be omitted.” (SD VII:79).¹⁰
- d. However, the Lutheran Confessions also warn that in order to preserve the true teaching of Christ, it is not a valid Sacrament only to have the words of institution itself recited publicly, if the entire action or administration is not carried out in the following manner:

that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord’s death is proclaimed, as St Paul presents the entire action of the breaking of the bread or its distribution and reception in 1 Corinthians 10:[16*] (SD VII: 84).¹¹

And,

this useful rule and guide is taken from the Words of Institution: nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use [*usus*] instituted by Christ or the divinely instituted action [*actio*]. ... [86] 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, as Christ established the administration of the Supper: the consecration, or Words of Institution, and the distribution and reception or oral partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, Christ’s body and blood. Apart from this practice it is not to be regarded as a sacrament...(SD VII: 85-87).¹²

- e. Since, what is received into the mouth orally is the body and blood of Christ, the Lutheran pastor has to be careful that these elements are treated respectfully

⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 607. Note that though the emphasis is on the words of Christ that are efficacious but it should be administered through the pastor on Christ’s behalf which makes this a true administration of the Sacrament.

¹⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 607.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 608.

throughout Holy Communion, and if there are leftovers it must also be properly dealt with.

Q4: Does virtual communion allow for the proper reception of the elements?

A4: What is received by the communicants spiritually by faith and orally is the actual body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is the understanding of proper reception. In virtual communion, the pastor may consecrate the bread and wine, by taking it, but it is not distributed directly to the communicants and received by actual eating and drinking. As the communicants eat their own bread and wine at home, the whole action of Christ's institution is not carried out together as a whole. This is evidenced by the fact that when the pastor consecrates the elements, what Christ says to the communicants is to "take, eat..." and "take...drink", referring to the particular bread and wine which he had consecrated in his own hands, they are not the ones taken up by the communicants to eat and to drink. Hence, a disjunction between the elements consecrated and the non-distribution of those particular elements is seen here. There is then no true reception either by faith and orally: the body and blood of Christ. Therefore, even with the words of Christ's institution recited by the pastor, virtual communion is no communion.

4. **The *Una Sancta*:** For the true unity of the church, the one holy Christian church, it consists in "the assembly of believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel" (AC VII:1).¹³
 - a. This means that the Holy Communion ("for the forgiveness of sins"), is the gospel, received by the actual eating and drinking of those who are present together ("the assembly of believers") and this event is a mark of the one, holy Christian church.
 - b. This assumes that the one, holy Christian (universal/catholic) church is corporately gathered at the Liturgy of Holy Communion. This church is both victorious (in the heavenly realm) and militant (the actual church seen on earth). According to the Lutheran Confessions, preaching the pure gospel and the Holy Communion administered as gospel, are both marks of this one, true church of God:

Nor indeed are we dreaming about some platonic republic, as some have slanderously alleged. Instead, we teach that this church truly exists, consisting of true believing and righteous people scattered through the entire world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments (Ap VII & VIII:20).¹⁴

¹³ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 40.

¹⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 177.

- c. Since the only church at that time in Christendom, was led by the Pope who is identified as the Anti-christ, then, the question naturally arises as to where the true church can then be found? The Lutheran church did not answer by saying that on earth there is an invisible church and a visible church, such that the invisible church is like a platonic state. Rather, she confesses the hidden church on earth, hidden because it consists of hypocrites as well in both head and number, together with “the assembly of all believers and saints” (AC VIII:1). Lutherans use the word “mark” to mean the hidden church which can be found on earth through certain visible signs and actions. Hence, Holy Communion is known as one of the marks of the true church, besides preaching the gospel.
- d. Paul speaks about Holy Communion as a mark of the one church, Christ’s body in 1 Cor 10:17 “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” Paul subsequently admonished those who divide this body by their action of eating and drinking privately, when they should do so together, thereby breaking the sign of the oneness of the church. We hear this in 1 Cor 11:20-21: “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s supper [*kyriakon deipnon*] that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal [*idion deipnon*: own supper].”

Q5: Does virtual communion properly expresses Holy Communion as a mark of the church gathered on earth in a certain locality?

A5: Virtual communion is not the church gathered in a locality to celebrate the Holy Communion, which serves as a mark of the true church of God on earth. There are actually many privately held rituals at different locations, although they are all watching virtually on-line, the pastor consecrating his own bread and wine, which is not actually distributed to everyone. In virtual communion, they did not do what would have been done at the Holy Communion, which is to eat and drink the body and blood of Christ together at one locality. So, neither the pastor’s own ritual nor those who are separated in different locations having their own rituals are actually the Holy Communion, which is the unity that is of the eating together of the one bread (of Holy Communion) which is a sign of the oneness of the church.

C. Conclusion

The desire of Christians for the Holy Communion springs from different understanding of what Holy Communion means, hence there are different answers given as to the question, whether virtual communion is actually Holy Communion? This paper argues that virtual communion is not actual Holy Communion because:

- a) The proper administration of the Sacrament cannot be done as the pastor cannot properly administer what he cannot see and administrate when the communicants are located in different places.

- b) The proper consecration of the Sacrament is not done when the bread and wine that is consecrated at the church altar is different from those that are at home, prepared by the communicants themselves before-hand. The consecrating words of institution is not enough to make a valid sacrament when the distribution and the reception is not within the gathered assembly of believers at a particular location.
- c) The proper distribution of the consecrated elements at the altar is not done when what was consecrated at the altar was not distributed at all to the participants who are watching virtually. Furthermore, when the pastor cannot distinguish among those who are participating (public sinners may very well be participating at their own locale), he cannot give sacramental pastoral care.
- d) The proper reception of the communion is not done as the bread and wine that is the body and blood of Christ is eaten both only by faith and not orally, when virtual communion only admits to eating the unconsecrated bread and wine prepared at home, as if faith makes those elements into a sacrament, and not the actual words of institution when the pastor hold the elements in his hands. Hence, what is received is home prepared bread and wine, which are not consecrated in the hands of the pastor, and so it is not the actual body and blood of Christ, consumed orally.
- e) The Holy Communion is a sign, or a mark of the true church because it is the believers gathered together (in one location) to eat and drink the one body of Christ bodily. This cannot be seen in virtual communion, which is many man-made rituals happening at different locations at the same time, eating and drinking separately on their own, although this is communicated through a virtual medium.

Lutheran doctrine defined Holy Communion according to the scriptures. If it cannot be done as it should be, according to the institution of Christ, during a particular period of time such as this, when people are quarantined and cannot gather together, then what is meant to feed Christians spiritually and orally with the body and blood of Christ cannot be done because by doing it as virtual communion is no communion. The definition of virtual communion at the beginning of this paper, is certainly a different kind of communion from the one that is instituted by Christ. Therefore, when a group of people participates in the human ritual of virtual communion, they are not receiving the body and blood of Christ, and will not then receive its benefit, which is forgiveness of sin and instead, they inevitably denounce Christ's own institution and command.

Rev Dr Samuel Wang, Trinity Theological College.