

VIRTUAL COMMUNION

For the purposes of this paper, “virtual communion” will be defined as the live streaming of a Holy Communion service to various remote locations where communicants, having prepared their own bread and wine, then partake of these “elements” in the belief that they are receiving “communion” even though the minister is not physically present on site to consecrate and administer the elements.

This paper will argue that virtual communion is highly problematic for biblical and theological reasons. The arguments will be presented under the headings of (1) institution, (2) consecration, (3) *koinonia* (fellowship), (4) unity/individualized suppers, and (5) gathering.

1. Institution

Background: The Lord’s Supper was instituted by Jesus on the night of his betrayal in the context of a meal. The institution is recalled in the liturgical formula known as the “Words of Institution,” which contains both the command to repeat the action (“Do this,” etc.) as well as the promises pertaining to the action, namely, that the bread and wine are Jesus’ body and blood and are given for the forgiveness of sins. Lutherans hold that the recitation of the Words of Institution (in and of themselves) does not make the Lord’s Supper a valid sacrament, unless the *entire* action of the Supper is carried out. Christ’s command to “Do this” must be “observed without division or confusion.” In other words, bread and wine must be taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk.¹ In order to preserve true teaching and prevent abuses of the Lord’s Supper, the *Formula of Concord* (1580), an important Lutheran confessional document, establishes the following principle: *nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ or the divinely instituted actions*. The *Formula* adds parenthetically: “When Christ’s institution is not observed as he established it, *there is no sacrament*.”²

Question: In virtual communion, is the sacrament observed in its entirety?

Response: Virtual communion clearly does not allow for the Supper to be observed in its entirety. First, there is no *taking* of the bread by the presiding minister in each and every location to which a virtual service of communion would be live-streamed. The action of “taking” (holding, touching) the elements is necessary to demonstrate that *this* bread is now subject to Christ’s command and promise, and likewise the cup. Second, in a virtual communion the presiding minister does not “give” the bread to all communicants, which is necessary to symbolize the giving of Christ’s body to every communicant. In other words, the mandated actions are not carried out at each site by the minister who has been called and ordained by the church to administer the Lord’s Supper. At best, the action of the sacrament is confused and divided. Accordingly, it is highly questionable whether a “sacrament” even takes place in virtual communion.

¹ *Formula of Concord*, Art. VII (The Holy Supper), in *Book of Concord*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 607.84. Henceforth, BC

² *Formula of Concord*, Art. VII, BC 608.86. Emphasis added.

2. Consecration

Background:

Christians believe that in Holy Communion, there is a “consecration” of the communion elements, that is, a setting apart of the elements, whereby they become more than ordinary bread and wine but the bearers of divine grace and blessings through the Word of Christ. Lutherans hold that after the consecration, bread and wine of Holy Communion are the true body and blood of Jesus given for participants to eat and drink.³ Further, they hold that while there is a “real presence” of Christ “in, with, and under” the sacramental elements, bread and wine remain bread and wine, with no change in their substance. Instead there is a “sacramental union”⁴ whereby both Christ’s body and blood are united to and received with the sacramental elements. What is decisive for consecration and sacramental union are Christ’s own actions of commanding and instituting the Supper, for as Luther writes:

This command and institution of his have the power to accomplish [consecration], that we do not distribute and receive 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.⁵

But while the words of Christ that instituted the sacrament remain effective today, this does not mean that just any bread can be considered the sacramental element: “If I were to say, over all the bread there is, ‘This is the body of Christ,’ nothing would happen, but when we follow his institution and command in the Supper and say “This is my body....”⁶

Question: If elements are consecrated by the spoken Word of Christ, can a consecration take place even if the words are spoken in one place and the elements are in another place, namely, where a live-streamed service is being heard by a group of people?

Response: The above quote indicates that consecration occurs only insofar as the institution and command of Christ are followed in the administration of the Supper. The Supper was instituted in connection with a meal, and a meal normally occurs in one place, rather than in multiple places. Virtual communion therefore represents a deviation from the instituted form of the Supper in this respect. Additionally, virtual communion cannot be said to follow the original institution because the elements themselves are in multiple locations at once, rather than in one place. The New Testament does not indicate that a liturgical act of thanksgiving or consecration can occur in one place and the effect of that action in another. It is therefore questionable, at best, whether consecration occurs in virtual communion and thus whether the benefits of Christ’s suffering and death are distributed and received. At worst, virtual communion raises the question of whether we can “consecrate” any bread that we want, opening the way to possible abuse and confusion.

³ Martin Luther, “*Sacrament of the Altar*” (1-2), *Small Catechism*, BC 362.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), vol. 37:300. Henceforth LW.

⁵ Martin Luther, *The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests*, LW 38:199.

⁶ Martin Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper*, LW 37:184.

3. Koinonia

Background: In 1 Corinthians 10, St Paul indicates that the Lord's Supper is not only a "participation" (*koinonia* or "fellowship") in the body and blood of Christ (v 16) but also a sign and enactment of the fellowship of the community of believers (v 17):

Is not the cup of blessing that we bless a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one loaf.

Question: Can virtual communion signify and enact the *koinonia* of the church?

Response: Arguably, the concept of *koinonia* demands the physical proximity of those who presume to be in "fellowship" with one another. (We might note that the Greek word *koinonia* can refer to the sexual intimacy of marriage.) Paul's own concept seems to demand a physical proximity of participants because the *koinonia* is enacted by the sharing of *one* loaf, something that must be done by a group of people gathered in *one* location.

If virtual communion involves multiple locations of people presumably sharing in different sets of elements in these locations, the sense of common fellowship is obscured not only because of the lack of physical proximity among participants but also because of the multiplicity of "cups" and "loaves." In virtual communion, the symbolism of "one cup" and "one loaf" is lacking and so there is not the enactment of the *koinonia*.

While communion might involve multiple wafers, these at least are (1) of one kind, (2) set on one table, and (3) consecrated by one minister. Given these realities, any attempt to justify virtual communion by arguing that the bread "is already divided" in a normal communion service is not convincing.

4. Unity and Individualized Suppers

Background: St Paul encountered a fractured congregation in Corinth. The disunity was apparent in the Corinthian meal practice: wealthy members arrived first and ate their meals. The poorer members, however, arrived later and usually ended up going hungry, since all of the food had been consumed by then. To St Paul such a practice only served to accentuate social differences among congregation members, when in fact the meal should be a sign of unity. After all, Christ had effectively united humanity by gaining salvation for us from the condemning wrath of God. In Christ, all human distinctions had been overcome, whether male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free person (Galatians 3). But if a church engages in a meal practice that accentuates social differences it denies the significance of Christ's work on the Cross. By creating cliques within the community, the meal practice of the Corinthians had fractured congregational unity, and could hardly be the Supper of the Lord whose saving work unites humanity (1 Corinthians 11:20).

Question: Does virtual communion enable the church to practice communion in a way that maintains the unity of the fellowship which St Paul sets down as a criterion of authenticity?

Response: In virtual communion, there are essentially multiple meals simultaneously—arguably a modern-day realization of what St Paul called *idiom deipnon* or private suppers (1 Corinthians 11:21). Although the spirit of virtual communion under the circumstances of

COVID 19 is quite different from that of the wealthy Corinthians with their “private suppers,” virtual communion nevertheless tends to accentuate groups and individuals at precisely the moment when we should be emphasizing unity and common fellowship. Virtual communion would seem to deny the very meaning of the Lord’s Supper as that which unifies the church, and thus raises doubts as to whether it can be considered “the Lord’s Supper.”

5. Gathering

Background: There are numerous places in the Bible where people are told to gather together for worship. In Deuteronomy 31 (vv 9-13), Moses commands the Israelites to come together every 7 years for the reading of the Law. In Nehemiah chapter 8, the people of Israel come together to hear the Law read and explained. A national crisis prompts the prophet Joel to call the people to assemble for an act of repentance and to plead for God’s mercy (Joel 2:15-17). In the book of Acts, the earliest Christians gathered together to hear the apostles’ teaching, to pray, and to “break bread,” that is, to share the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42-47). Paul states that his letters are to be read before gathered assemblies of Christians (Colossians 4:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:27). These passages indicate the importance of a communal gathering of people to hear God’s Word. Certainly, the Bible witnesses to acts of worship by individuals and small groups. But the physical gathering of a *community* of people for worship is biblically normative. Furthermore, the act of God’s people gathering together witnesses to God’s desire to save a *people* and then send them in mission to the world (Luke 1:68; 1 Peter 2:9).

Question: If the online services of the Word produced by Lutheran Church in Singapore (LCS) congregations are “worship,” why can’t we have online services of communion as well? If the former is a valid form of worship, why not the latter?

Response: The question really is not whether an online service of the Word constitutes “worship,” but whether it is *normative public worship*. Given the biblical importance of Christians *gathering* together physically to worship God through the reading and hearing of God’s Word, an online service of the Word is not a normative service of the Word, but rather an exceptional way in which LCS congregations have sought to share the Word of God in the emergency situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In that case, the online service of the Word cannot be held up as a standard of (public) worship, since the physical gathering of God’s people does not take place. As noted above, the coming together of people to share in the one loaf and cup is vital to the meaning of the Lord’s Supper. It does not follow, then, that because churches share the Word through online streaming, they should seek to virtualize the Lord’s Supper as well. To do so would be to proceed on the basis of something that is exceptional, rather than on the basis of the biblical command and institution of the Supper.

Conclusion

In a virtual communion, the Supper cannot be administered according to its biblical institution, and virtual communion raises questions about whether a consecration even happens. Additionally, virtual communion is a poor witness to the fellowship aspect of the Supper, because it presumes to enact fellowship among dispersed groups of people, effectively re-creating the individualized Suppers that St Paul decried. Virtual communion is therefore a practice that Lutherans should avoid.

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