

Communion and Covid-19

The current crisis caused by the coronavirus or Covid-19 pandemic is disrupting every facet of life for our entire continent and for most of the world. Increasing restrictions on social ties and connections—“social distancing”—while endorsed by most medical authorities are now also being mandated increasingly by governing authorities. Among the practices of social distancing is the avoidance of group settings—settings such as Christian worship.

A growing number of LCMS churches are suspending services temporarily because of Covid-19. This presents significant challenges for Christian life and the church’s well-being. Christians treasure his Word and Sacraments and so we treasure regular corporate worship. Colossians 3:16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” Similarly, we treasure fellowship with one another and know that the Word tells us not to forsake meeting together so that we can continue to encourage each other (Hebrew 10:25).

The Small Catechism summarizes the Lutheran understanding of the importance of public worship in its teaching on the third commandment: “We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” As a consequence, we hold services each Lord’s Day and at other times, and encourage all members to attend regularly in order to receive the gifts of Christ in Word and Sacrament. At the same time we have not made a law of Sunday worship. We know that our services are not something we are doing to earn a place with God. Jesus tells us that “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). There are times when the obligations of Christian love may lead individuals *not* to worship with a congregation. A church member with a bad cold, flu, or another contagious disease will generally refrain from attending services lest he or she infect others. Congregations have canceled services entirely in order to protect their members during inclement weather. Understandably, then, in the current circumstance, many LCMS congregations have again determined that they should suspend services for a time out of love for those who might contract the deadly Covid-19 virus.

Such churches are able to find various ways to help members to hear the Word of Christ richly. From telephone calls to emails to website messaging to instant messaging to sermon streaming, the Word is being heard and received in the midst of the coronavirus. But what of the Sacrament of the Altar? The forgiveness of sins is not prevented when one cannot commune, for it is delivered by the Gospel as it is read and preached and spoken by the royal priesthood and also in the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Supper as well as in Absolution. But it is only in the Lord’s Supper that we eat and drink Christ’s very body and blood. It thereby offers a special assurance that is proper only to it, just as Baptism has its own assurances. The inability to commune is therefore no small matter, but a true hardship!

We know, however, that the church has known this hardship at other times and not only in our own time. During the early years of colonial America, Lutherans often went weeks or months without the Supper. Congregations without a pastor are often unable to receive the Lord's Supper in their services because supply pastors are unavailable—sometimes for lengthy time periods. And, in the early 20th century during the great influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, many Missouri Synod churches were not able to meet for any services during a period of time. We are not in uncharted territory.

Some unsatisfactory solutions to the unavailability of the Sacrament have been suggested at the present time. One is that a pastor speak the words of institution from the church during a streaming service while everyone communes at home. Another is to have the pastor consecrate elements in the presence of elders or deacons who would in turn administer them to members. While the hunger and thirst for the Lord's Supper that leads to such measures is both understandable and commendable, the solutions are nevertheless faulty.

A video streaming “consecration” with words spoken by the pastor remotely and communion elements in member homes is almost identical to an approach that the CTCR addressed in 2006¹ in which the Commission said:

1. The Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus with words and actions spoken and carried out by him in the direct presence of his disciples (Matt. 26:26-28). Throughout history, the church has sought to be faithful to Christ's practice in this regard. Pastors speak the words of institution in the presence of the assembled congregation, thereby giving assurance that we are “doing this” as our Lord has instructed us to do (Luke 22:19). Whenever the actual words and actions of the celebrant in consecrating the elements are intentionally separated (by time, distance, or technological means) from the distribution and reception, no assurance can be given that our Lord's instructions are being heeded and that the body and blood of Christ are actually being given and received for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of faith (cf. fn. 15 of the CTCR's 1983 report *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper* [TPLS]).

Moreover, this approach turns the words spoken by the pastor from a proclamation into an incantation of sorts. This, too, was addressed by the CTCR:

2. This practice lends itself to the unscriptural notion that the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper are present by virtue of the “incantation” of the pastor in some way,

¹ The CTCR responded to a question about DVD consecration. While there certainly are some dissimilarities between the question at that time and the present question about a video streaming consecration, the similarities are so strong that we are referencing the 2006 opinion extensively here. See CTCR, “Opinion on DVD Consecration (2006) at <https://files.lcms.org/w1/?id=7ZiqCqGn3FiMMtQcbrCFQuPjfn9AoMQ>.

shape or form, rather than by the gracious power of Christ and his Word. “Concerning the consecration,” says the Formula of Concord, “we believe, teach, and confess that no man’s work nor the recitation of the minister effect this presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, but it is to be ascribed solely and alone to the almighty power of our Lord Jesus Christ” (FC Ep VII, 8; quoted in TPLS, 15). While it is true that “the regularly called and ordained pastors of the church are to officiate at the administration of Holy Communion” (TPLS, 17-18), it is only “through Christ’s word and its power”—not through the mere “sound” or “recording” of the voice of the pastor—“that Christ’s body and blood are present in the bread and wine” (TPLS, 14).

Novelties such as these in the practice of the Lord’s Supper will inevitably lead *away* from the Sacrament itself as instituted by Christ to humanly-instituted *techniques* by which the Sacrament is purportedly being given. Note the third point raised by the CTCR in 2006:

3. As emphasized above, the focus in our celebration of the Lord’s Supper must always be on the gracious word of Christ—the word that gives assurance to hearts weighed down by guilt, doubt and fear that the great gifts promised here are truly given and received. The Commission says: “To...insert some personal idiosyncrasy into the consecration is to detract the people’s attention from the Sacrament. The congregation’s focus is to be on Christ’s word and invitation. The celebrant is a servant to sharpen that focus” (TPLS, 15).

The Lord’s Supper is intended to strengthen faith in God’s forgiving grace, a faith which counts on the Word of Christ’s promise that the bread and wine are His body and blood. To introduce doubts or uncertainty about the Sacrament negates this purpose. We can be thankful that God in His mercy has not given the Lord’s Supper as the only “means of grace.” Instead, he showers us with His grace. The Gospel is not silenced, forgiveness is proclaimed, Baptism will be administered even in emergencies, and Baptism is lived out daily by means of repentance and the new life that God’s Spirit enables us to live in any and all circumstances.

We also cannot support the suggestion that a pastor may consecrate elements with the elders or deacons, who would then administer them to members. The CTCR counseled against this practice on theological grounds in *Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper*, pages 26-27 (see also page 13 which opposes distribution without the *Verba*).² Moreover, given the clear guidance of medical and governing authorities regarding behavior that best minimizes the spread of infection, we note that this suggested practice introduces two potential opportunities for the transmission of Covid-19. The first is the interaction between the pastor and the elders/deacons. The second is the interaction of the individual elder or deacon with the communicant(s) in the home.

² CTCR (1983), <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=421>.

As great as the hardship is when we cannot receive Christ's body and blood, the hardship ought not be "resolved" in ways that promise an uncertain "sacrament" without the absolute assurance that Christ intends. It is better humbly and repentantly to ask the Lord for the regular administration of the Sacrament of the Altar to be restored to us, together with an end to the "deadly pestilence" that is killing thousands of souls who are precious to God, their Creator (see Psalm 91; Jonah 4:11).

In this uncertain time, let us encourage every baptized child of God to be fervent in seeking opportunities to hear the Word of God as it goes forth from written sermons, letters, websites, emails, streaming videos, and other means, to read the Word in their homes, to implore God to end this plague and preserve His church, and—as His royal priesthood—to "proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

In closing, we wish to echo the CTCR from 2006.

Finally, it is important to note that this response of the Commission is in no way intended to pass judgment on the motives of those involved. . . . The sole purpose of this response is to promote and encourage the proper practice of the Lord's Supper in faithfulness to the teaching and example of Christ, so that doubts and questions may be replaced by faith in Christ's gracious word, promise, and presence.

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CTCR resources for further study:

"Opinion on DVD Consecration" (2006) at <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=7ZiqCqGn3FiMMtQcbrcFQuPjfn9AoMQ>

The Royal Priesthood: Identity and Mission (2018) at <https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=sKchZQIivrVVAJ6JqTkyqmW2FUx9NQZo>

Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper (1983) at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=421>