



SECOND PASTORAL LETTER ON VIRTUAL COMMUNION

The Rev. Dr. Daniel W. Selbo
Bishop of the North American Lutheran Church

May 6, 2020

Dear NALC Pastors,

Happy Easter! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! It is in the hope and promise of our Lord's resurrection, and in the assurance that Christ is with us in all things, that we move forward in our partnership in the North American Lutheran Church (NALC) and in our calling to be and to make disciples of Jesus.

I am writing as a follow-up to the letter I sent last month requesting a moratorium on the virtual (distance or tele) sharing of the Lord's Supper. The purpose of the request was to allow our Commission on Theology & Doctrine (CTD) to address the question and to give each of us, myself included, more time to think and pray through an appropriate response and posture as a denomination. It was my concern at the time that the very Sacrament that was intended by our Lord to bring us together as God's people was beginning, if only in small ways, to move us apart. Rather than allow such to continue, I chose to send a letter asking for additional time and prayer.

Since that letter and moratorium request were sent, I have met with our CTD twice. Our meetings were productive and filled with good spirit. The depth of the conversations and the passion with which the dialogue took place was evident throughout. Each of the members were committed to upholding the scriptural witness and the Lutheran Confessions in addressing the question and sharing their understandings and positions. Our dialogue was a clear reminder of the foundation and unity we share in the North American Lutheran Church.

There was much consensus on the Commission regarding the Sacrament of Holy Communion. There was no debate around the gifts we have been given in our Lord's Supper. Our sins are forgiven. Faith is renewed and brought forth. The assurance of God's love and the promise of eternal life are ours in Christ. There was unanimity regarding the "real presence" of Jesus, when the earthly elements of bread and wine are combined with the eternal promises given to us in God's Word according to Christ's command. There was unanimous agreement in the role clergy

hold in the administration of the Sacrament for the sake of “good order,” and in the command Jesus gave that we are to share this meal often in remembrance of Him. There was also agreement that Holy Communion should be shared, ideally, in a context in which the people receiving the Sacrament are physically together.

The main departure among the CTD members centered around the question of whether a distance (tele-Communion) approach to our Lord’s Supper is faithful to the command of Jesus to share the Sacrament in the context of community. In other words, does a tele-Communion sharing represent a faithful application of the biblical texts and our Lord’s command? To facilitate the discussion, two position papers were produced, representing the two theological positions. Those position papers are available on our NALC website and included with this letter.

After receiving input from our Commission, spending many hours in conversation and prayer, along with my own study of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, I offer the following as your bishop:

With a significant majority of our Commission on Theology & Doctrine, along with the majority of the Christian community throughout the world, not able to find sufficient biblical support for a distance approach to Holy Communion, I request that the current distance-Communion moratorium remain in effect throughout the NALC.

With this request, I fully realize that the situation we are now facing with the coronavirus may continue for some time, and that adherence to this request will make it more challenging for all of us to share in our Lord’s Supper than we would like. To do so, I call upon our pastors to be creative in their approaches to and administration of the Sacrament. Small groups, varied opportunities and times, safe-distancing and procedures are all possibilities and in order. Even an abstinence from the Sacrament and a more intentional and direct communication of the promises and forgiveness given to us by Jesus in His Word are faithful approaches to the ministry with which we have been entrusted, given the novel pandemic we now face. I trust our pastors to be faithful in the ways they choose to honor this request.

Having said that, I also recognize that there are some members of our Commission, along with many of our NALC pastors, who, in light of the current pandemic, make faithful, biblical and confessional arguments in favor of distance Communion. As a result, I am not willing to make my “request” for a continued moratorium during this pandemic a required “mandate” for our church body.

I trust and respect the theological differences on the Commission. I also respect our pastors and trust them to be responsible to the faith and the calling we share. I have seen no abuse taking place, nor any casual or careless approaches to the sacred and sustaining meal we have been given. If you have wrestled with the scriptural texts, spent time in prayer with your Lord, are at peace with a distance approach to the Sacrament during this pandemic and, as a result, choose not to adhere to the request for a moratorium, know that my prayers are with you as you seek to faithfully guide and shepherd your flocks. The one request I would make, if you choose this approach, is that

you work to offer Communion in a synchronous and not an asynchronous manner. As much as possible, if the community being served can receive the Sacrament at the same time, at least the timing of the meal being shared will remain, even as the physical presence is not possible.

In offering this approach to a question of such importance and significance as the Sacrament of Holy Communion, I realize we may not all agree. I am not asking for your agreement with my decision. I am asking for your support, your prayers and your grace for each other and for our church body.

Moving forward, I will be asking our Commission to continue its discussion and work on developing a statement on our sacramental theology. I will also be working with them to develop a framework for deeper discussion among our clergy, including opportunity at our 2021 Pastors' Conference. This question will remain in front of us for some time.

Throughout Christian history, there have been many times in which faithful communities and faith-filled people have wrestled with the biblical texts. There have also been many times when the Church has been strengthened and renewed, as called and faithful followers of Jesus have been willing to engage in difficult and respectful discussion and debate. I believe this can and will be one of those times for us.

In the spirit of the apostle Paul's admonition to respect the differences found in the various practices of the believers in Rome, allow me to close with this one verse. "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification" (Romans 14:19 ESV).

Thank you for your understanding and your prayers. May God continue to lead us, in Jesus, as we seek to follow and to grow faithfully together in the North American Lutheran Church.

In Christ Jesus,

Bishop Dan

POSITION PAPER #1: “SOCIAL DISTANCING” AND THE MEANS OF GRACE

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Dr. David S. Yeago, *North American Lutheran Seminary (Ambridge, PA)*

The challenges surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic are unprecedented – not in the church catholic, which has faced widespread sickness across the centuries, but in the life of our congregations. Aside from the prevalent threats of deadly illness, economic uncertainty and pervasive anxiety, the preventive measures supported by medical professionals and imposed by civil authorities have the discouraging effect of keeping us from gathering together in worship, sharing desperately needed fellowship, and visiting one other in our homes.

These deprivations are serious. The gathering (*ecclesia*) of the faithful around the Word in proclamation and the Sacraments is the heart of what it means to be Christ Centered. Properly grasped, however, this moratorium on assemblies may become a self-emptying act of Christian love in keeping with our theology of vocation. While the assembly in the Word is the “heart” of discipleship – where the branches meet the vine (John 15:5) – the holy calling of the Body within their “varieties of service” (1 Cor. 12:5) is the circulation of Christ’s abundant life pumped into the world. In light of the New Commandment of Love (John 13:34), the privations of “social distancing” may become a prayerful offering for the protection and wellbeing of the neighbor and the assistance of those with medical callings who tirelessly work to heal and make an end to this outbreak.

THE FLEXIBILITY OF THE SPOKEN WORD

In spite of – because of – this crisis, the task of preaching the Gospel remains paramount. Observations comparing the 21st-century communications revolution to the advent of the 16th-century printing press are appropriate. Now, as then, the church has a newfound vehicle for the widespread circulation of the Gospel. Now, however, transmission can be “live,” *immediately* accessible. Legible, audible and visible options are at our fingertips behind our desks and pulpits, with no additional personnel required.

None of these methods is a proper substitute for the personal gathering of the faithful in worship, of course. (We will all need a gentle reminder or two on that score before all this is over.) They can, however, convey the external Word of God as a means of grace. This is because the promise of Christ in *preaching* is bound to the *message* of the Gospel communication itself.¹ As Jesus explains to the disciples, “Whoever hears you, hears me” (Luke 10:16). St. Paul repeats this promise: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). In this

¹ See David S. Yeago, “Quarantine, Word, and Sacrament,” *LocalPrayers*, St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, April 8, 2020, <https://www.localprayers.com/US/Monroe/892797130753775/St.-Luke%27s-Lutheran-Church> (accessed April 9, 2020).

continuous teaching, the Lord promises to “be with [us] always” (Matt. 28:20) – He enters into fellowship with those who hear His Word. “For the preaching of the gospel,” Luther reasons, “is nothing else than Christ being brought to us or we being brought to him.”² And again in the *Large Catechism*: “God has caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which he has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation. Therefore to sanctify is nothing else than *to bring us to the Lord Christ to receive this blessing, which we could not obtain by ourselves.*”³ One may therefore rightly speak of the *real presence* of Christ with respect to Gospel speech, alone.⁴

In addition to its prevalence, the direction of our preaching is also important. The radical accessibility of online streaming has already proven to be a blessed means of evangelism, and it may very well be that many more folks will watch and hear the Word in a video than would sit in the pews on any given Sunday. But first and foremost, a pastor’s proclamation is directed to his or her flock: the particular congregation that he or she may address as no one else can.⁵ This is the task Paul lifts up to Timothy – to proclaim the Gospel *in and out of season* (2 Tim. 4:2), or in our case, in person and, as necessary, from afar. During this pandemic, the separation, isolation, and frustration of the people engender a variety of temptations, and the baptized need the external Word of Christ to be convicted and comforted. This necessity (1 Cor. 9:16) is not lifted by any stay-at-home order; and in a pinch, the feet that bring Good News (Rom. 10:15) are no less beautiful for appearing on a screen.

THE SPECIFICITY OF CHRIST’S COMMAND

The same necessity of the external Word of the Gospel that allows for its flexible proliferation in this season, however, also requires its careful discretion with respect to the Sacraments. As the *Large Catechism* explains, **the “chief thing to be considered” in Lutheran theology with respect to the Sacraments is “God’s Word and ordinance or command.”**⁶ This consideration is not some human attempt to bind the Word to the bread and wine and somehow limit the power of the

² Martin Luther, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels*, in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 35:121.

³ Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism” [hereafter cited as LC], Part II:38-39, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert and others (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) [hereafter cited as BC], 415-416. Emphasis added.

⁴ See Paul Hinlicky, “Why Virtual Communion is Not Nearly Radical Enough,” *Let’s Talk: 20 Years of Living Theology in the Metropolitan Chicago Synod since 1966*, April 2, 2020, <http://mcsletstalk.org/communion-and-community/why-virtual-communion-is-not-nearly-radical-enough/> (accessed April 9, 2020).

⁵ See Yeago, “Quarantine.”

⁶ LC V:4, in BC, 447.

Gospel. It is faithful recognition of the Lord's own attachment of His promise to a specific action with particular objects, "without man's counsel or deliberation."⁷ Just as Christ directed the apostles to baptize and to speak the Good News – and so promised to be with them – He also commanded them to share in the Supper, and He anchored His personal, *bodily* fellowship to its celebration. Jesus thereby establishes the chief avenue of His availability to the church, and He gives our faith something objective to grasp.⁸

The Church is the people whose Lord is Jesus Christ. He has accomplished our salvation. It belongs to Him (Rev. 7:10), and He has decided how to share it with us in the power of the Spirit. We cannot acknowledge Jesus as Lord and then invent our own ways of sharing in salvation. For our Lutheran tradition, therefore, nothing is more important for the church than the commands and promises of Christ by which He has given form to our life and ministry.

As far as the sacraments are concerned, this means that Christ's words instituting the Sacraments are central and binding to the Church. Luther and the Reformers could not compromise on the practice of communing the laity with the consecrated bread alone, because Jesus took the cup and said, "*All of you drink this*" (Matt. 26:27).⁹ The argument that the laity did not receive a lesser blessing than the clergy was irrelevant; **the issue was the authority of the command of Christ, which theological theory, pastoral considerations, or the decisions of church leadership could not override.**

The upshot is that Jesus said to "do this." If what we "do" is recognizable as the whole action He specified, then our faith can be certain of His promise. If we do not follow the Lord's direction and elect to do something – anything – else, then assurance of this particular promise evaporates.¹⁰ As to what the biblical mandate is, the Lutheran Confessions are clear.

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. 10:16.¹¹

⁷ LC V:4, in BC, 447.

⁸ See Robert W. Jenson, *A Large Catechism*, 2nd ed. (Delhi, New York: ALPB, 1999), 53.

⁹ See Martin Luther, "The Smalcald Articles" [hereafter cited as SA], Part III, Art. VI:2-3, in BC, 311. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ See Yeago, "Quarantine."

¹¹ "Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration" [hereafter cited as FC:SD], Art. VII:83-84, in BC, 584. Emphasis added.

This language of *distribution* and *reception* recurs often in the Confessions. It presumes a common source of bread and wine with a gathering of the faithful to receive, eat and drink it. Here again, Jesus makes Himself specifically available in a set *space* at a particular *time* within the *participation* (*koinonia*) of the assembled body around the “one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). Adherence to His command, in His Word, is what makes this fellowship the Lord’s Supper – not “our” supper, or even the *Church’s* supper to adapt on demand.¹² “Distribution” does not refer to the individual’s reception of Christ’s benefits, but to Christ’s “giving” the elements to the disciples to eat and drink, which the Church is commanded to do also.

The Reformers were adamant that the church has no authority to alter this foundational form of the Supper, for whatever reason. So the Formula of Concord: “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 and should be profitably urged and retained in the church of God.”¹³ This criterion is simply the application of *Sola Scriptura* to sacramental theology.

Both the mandate and promise of Holy Communion depend on the *perspicuity* or clear meaning of the biblical text. The promise follows the plain sense of the Words of Institution: *This is my body, given for you*. The Lutheran understanding holds to this straightforward meaning: *What I am holding in my hand and giving to you now is my body*.¹⁴ Article 10 of the Augsburg Confession summarizes the point: “That in the Lord’s Supper the body and blood of Christ are truly and substantially present and are truly offered with the things that are seen, bread and wine.”¹⁵ Christ establishes His presence – consecrates the elements – by His own declaration. The promise itself forms the sacramental union between the bread and wine and His body and blood.

The Reformers rejected the notion that the mere utterance of the words of institution brought about this sacramental union, along with the accompanying fallacy that the priesthood possessed a special power to “perform” the Sacrament. The words do not serve as some kind of incantation, and the person, character or belief of the presider does not affect the efficacy of the Sacrament. Rather, it is the *proclamation* of the Words of Institution according to Jesus’ command – and thus within the entire action of “do this” – that is performative and constitutive of Holy Communion.¹⁶

¹² See Hinlicky, “Virtual Communion.”

¹³ FC:SD, Art. VII:85, in BC, 584.

¹⁴ See Yeago, “Quarantine.”

¹⁵ Philip Melancthon, “The Augsburg Confession” [hereafter cited as AC], Art. VII, in BC, 32.

¹⁶ FC:SD, Art. VII:74-75, in BC, 583.

The actions of hearing/receiving the Word and consuming the bread and wine are inseparable with respect to the Sacrament's efficacy. Nevertheless, **the two actions are not the same**. The Formula of Concord draws an essential distinction between the "spiritual" eating of the *Word* as the "Bread of Life" (John 6:48-58) and the "sacramental," oral eating of the Supper. *Spiritual* eating "is precisely faith – namely, that we *hear*, accept with faith, and appropriate to ourselves the Word of God" and its promise of "the grace of God, forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and everlasting life."¹⁷ There is significant flexibility apparent in "spiritual eating" – it is the same action as receiving the Word in preaching, and also in the life-to-life sharing of the Word that Luther calls "the mutual conversation and consolation" of the faithful.¹⁸ It is also what enables us to receive the Gospel from afar through various means of communication.

Sacramental eating in Holy Communion depends on this spiritual eating, but it is also different from it. "The other eating of the body of Christ is oral or sacramental, when **all who eat and drink the blessed bread and wine in the Lord's Supper** receive and partake of the **true, essential body and blood of Christ orally**. Believers receive it as a **certain pledge and assurance** that their sins are truly forgiven, that Christ dwells and is efficacious in them."¹⁹ The key point in sacramental eating is **Christ's objective availability on the occasion and in the way He has ordained**, despite my unworthiness. In following the action of His command and in hearing His Word, I am assured of His forgiving embrace that provides "strength and refreshment" in faith and life.²⁰

This clear *objectivity* of the Lord's presence in sacramental eating underscores why a definite time and place is central to the Sacrament of the Altar. In this unique mode of availability, *everyone* who receives the outstretched bread receives Christ, Himself. Whether they are baptized or unbaptized, believing or non-believing is irrelevant with respect to the Lord's bodily presence. "The Word by which it was constituted a sacrament is not rendered false because of an individual's unworthiness or belief."²¹ Jesus is *there* in His body, regardless of the recipient's condition or frame of mind. This is why proper oversight of the distribution is so important, as those who partake in non-belief are eating and drinking to their condemnation.²²

The concreteness of "sacramental eating" speaks to the justifying grace of the external Word. I bring *nothing* to the altar except my sin in repentance. When I receive the bread and wine in the

¹⁷ FC:SD, Art. VII:62, in BC, 581. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ SA III, Art. IV, in BC, 310.

¹⁹ FC:SD, Art. VII:63, in BC, 581. Emphasis added.

²⁰ LC V:27, in BC, 449.

²¹ LC V:17, in BC, 448.

²² LC V:69, in BC, 454.

assembly, Christ joins me to Himself in body and Spirit. I hear the promise, and then my bodily eating and drinking is also “spiritual”: when I receive Christ’s body and blood with faith in the promise, I receive with them “forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.”²³ It is the Supper as a whole, Word and element, which is an external proclamation of the Gospel.²⁴ On the one hand, the “entire action” of the Supper must accompany this promise, or else the Supper’s specific promise does not apply and Christ is not present. On the other hand, it is the word of promise that both presents me with the body and blood of Christ and proclaims that they are given ‘for me,’ for my salvation.²⁵

THE QUESTION OF “TELE-COMMUNION”

The practice of “virtual” or “tele-Communion,” in which a pastor invites the members of a congregation to present their own bread and wine in their homes and presides from a remote location through A/V technology, is a marked departure from the recognizable form of the Sacrament. Taken as a whole event, there is no clear sense of an “assembly.” If a true gathering is being filmed or otherwise recorded, then the bread and wine consecrated in the assembly is decisively *other* than the various portions of bread and wine furnished by parishioners in their homes.

An attempt to extend the assembly by virtual means and consecrate the elements from a remote location dismisses the clear sense of the Words of Institution. The confessional witness makes no allowance for such a departure. “We reject... the assertion that the words of institution are not to be simply understood in their strict sense... but *through tropes or a figurative interpretation are to be given a different, new, and strange sense. We reject all such Sacramentarian opinions and mutually contradictory views, no matter how manifold and various they may be.*”²⁶ To put it simply, “*this is my body*” – not “whatever you have in front of you across town,” which would decisively qualify as a “new” and “strange” interpretation. Luther speaks to the circumstance almost directly in his *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528):

Here, too, ***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 Lord’s Supper and say, “This is my body,” then it is his body, not because of our speaking or of our efficacious

²³ Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” Part VI:6, in BC, 352.

²⁴ See Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 107.

²⁵ LC V:9, in BC, 447.

²⁶ FC:SD, Art. VII:113, in BC, 589. Emphasis added.

work, but *because of his command in which he has told us to speak and to do and has attached his own command and deed to our speaking.*²⁷

The Words of Institution are not enough. Without the full context of Christ's command, including a recognizable gathering, a distribution of a common meal, and a proclamation of the Gospel, there is a fundamental breakdown of sacramental integrity. The Formula of Concord deserves another look on this score: "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.*"²⁸ That Holy Communion may be practiced in any and all places, in different times and circumstances, is certainly the case; and thanks be to God for that! But there is a solid cohesion to each celebration – what the Confessions refer to as the "entire action" of the Meal. Tele-Communion's attempt at remote consecration fractions the celebration rather than the elements, and thus abandons this sacramental coherence.

The argument that "distance preaching" and "distance Communion" must be mutually efficacious or not fails to consider both the flexibility of the spoken Word – the freedom of the Gospel – and the specificity of Jesus' directive concerning the Sacrament. There is no general or uniform mode to the means of grace. All of them are modalities of the external Word. According to that same Word of Christ, however, they do not come to us in exactly the same manner. Again, the "chief thing to be considered" is Christ's Word and command,²⁹ and the church has no authority to alter the Word.

Recognition of the differentiation among the means of grace does not imply a difference in efficacy, but of method. It is not a separation of the Word from the Sacraments, but a faithful acknowledgement of Christ's commands concerning them. Ignoring the modalities of the external Word amounts to reducing the Sacraments to the spoken Word, alone. This in turn ignores the confessional distinction between "spiritual" and "sacramental" eating, and thereby attenuates the objectivity of Christ's particular promise in Holy Communion.

In terms of ecclesiology, tele-Communion damages the unity of the body in doctrine and practice. This matter extends beyond arguments of adiaphora, as it concerns fundamental tenets of sacramental theology. The church is where "the Gospel is preached in its purity and the sacraments are administered *according to the Gospel.*"³⁰ Tele-Communion ignores the clear biblical sense of "do this," and many members of the NALC would therefore find themselves unable to participate for

²⁷ Martin Luther, "Confession Concerning Christ's Supper," in LW 37:184. Emphasis added.

²⁸ FC:SD, Art. VII:83-84, in BC, 584. Emphasis added.

²⁹ LC V:4, in BC, 447.

³⁰ AC, Art. VII, in BC, 32.

reasons of conscience. The yield will be a dysfunctional congregationalism in which members of one parish regard another's sacramental practice as unfaithful. With respect to broader Christian unity, any legitimization of tele-Communion will cause extensive ecumenical barriers. Moreover, just as a great number of faulty interpretations will arise, so will a thousand different ways in which the elements are chosen and featured. This is a real breach of good order since it allows people to arrange Communion in whatever subjective way they want. Those without bread and wine at hand will simply be excluded by default, or else tempted to provide "symbolic" substitutes out of expediency.

THE QUESTION OF "HOUSEHOLD COMMUNION"

Some have also raised the question of "household Communion" – celebrating the Supper in the home, with an appeal to the "priesthood of all believers." This is also problematic, but for different reasons. The Reformers were well acquainted with this phenomenon. Luther consistently denied that the common priesthood shared in Holy Baptism authorized heads of household to preside at Holy Communion, or for families to celebrate the Supper in their homes apart from the assembly.

The calling to *priesthood* entails representing other people in the sight of God.³¹ The priesthood of all believers therefore consists in obedience to the Great Commission through teaching/catechesis and prayer: interceding for one another and sharing the Gospel in what Luther calls "the mutual conversation and consolation" of Christian fellowship.³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains the importance of this mutual conversation in his *Life Together*: "The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him. He needs him again and again when he becomes uncertain and discouraged, for by himself he cannot help himself without belying the truth ... The Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the word of his brother; his own heart is uncertain, his brother's is sure."³³ Such consolation is no small thing. When what we share together is the apostolic, external Word of Christ, then it is a means of grace. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers also encompasses the many ways that believers support one another in Christian love – the "varieties of service" (1 Cor. 12:5) referenced earlier with respect to vocation. This is the *private*, life-to-life ministry in which all Christians share.³⁴

But once again: while the means of grace are all various forms of the one external Word of Christ, they are not all cut from the same mandate. Holy Communion is *public* – entrusted not to the household, but to the Church, the community of disciples "called out" of the world (*ecclesia*) over-against the nations to be the Body of Christ. Only in coming together publicly can the Church

³¹ See Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheran Slogans: Use and Abuse* (Delhi, New York: ALPB, 2011), 23.

³² SA III, Art. IV, in BC, 310.

³³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: HarperCollins, 1954), 22-23.

³⁴ See Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 184.

celebrate the Supper. And only one who has been called by the church for *public* ministry and assigned to the Office of Preaching may preside at the Supper.³⁵ So again Luther: “This is not our work or speaking but the command and ordinance of Christ that ... make the bread the body and the wine the blood that are daily distributed *through our ministry and office*.”³⁶

The means of grace have different emergency provisions with respect to the priesthood of all believers. Because Christ has given us no other way by which to enter into the fellowship of salvation, Baptism may be celebrated *privately* when death is at hand. The Office of the Keys is a *public* office because it may be exercised not only to comfort the conscience but also to bar “manifest and impenitent sinners” from the Lord’s Table.³⁷ Every Christian, however, may participate in the Office of the Keys by speaking a private word of the assurance of forgiveness to a troubled fellow-believer for the sake of Christ — a return to the promise of Baptism. The Lord’s Supper, by contrast, has no emergency, *private* provision. Though it conveys “a certain pledge and assurance” of forgiveness and of Christ’s bodily fellowship,³⁸ it is neither the doorway to salvation that Baptism alone is, nor is it the only appointed way for Christians to be strengthened in their journey. There is thus no “emergency Holy Communion,” because there is no emergency in which Christians cannot receive full assurance of God’s promise in Christ by the spoken word and the return to Baptism.

In the biblical witness, the logic of 1 Corinthians 11 applies to the question of household communion, but in reverse. Paul is admonishing the Corinthians for bringing the cliques of their household groups into the assembly — i.e., for not discerning the body. By the same token, that which belongs integrally to the *body* of the assembly — the Supper — should remain in its keeping, not taken and co-opted by the household. While whole families can be baptized (Acts 10:48, 16:33), they receive the Sacrament as individuals. Just as their Baptism calls them out of the world and out of the nations, it also calls them out of the *household* and into the holy community of the Church. The historic practice of “christening,” giving a new name in Baptism, reflects this reality, as does the current practice of omitting the surname during the baptismal liturgy. The baptized return to their households and to their other “posts” of service in the world with the obligation to mold these vocations according to the Word and will of God. Parental attention to the vows made at their children’s Baptism is a prime example of this obligation. It also illuminates a crucial distinction: parents are to “faithfully bring [their children] to the service of God’s house.”³⁹ The

³⁵ See Forde, 183-184.

³⁶ FC:SD, Art. VII:77, in BC, 583.

³⁷ SA III, Art. VII and IX, in BC, 311-312 and 314.

³⁸ FC:SD, Art. VII:63, in BC, 581.

³⁹ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 121.

household remains distinct from the church, and it cannot assimilate the latter's singular task and invitation to *do this in remembrance of me*.

THE WAY FORWARD: PASTORAL FREEDOM AND CONFSSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

God willing, the duration of this pandemic and its interruption of the church's worship life will be fleeting – may it be so! In the meantime, questions remain concerning proper sacramental practice. On one level, the answer is clear. If we cannot gather as the church at all, then we wait in prayerful patience until we can do so again. Christ's own deep desire to be with us and bless us is demonstrated by His gift of Holy Communion itself. We can therefore be confident that He will bless those who desire the Lord's Supper even though they are prevented from celebrating it. Trusting in Christ's assurance, we share in the Word of God, "preached, believed, professed, and lived,"⁴⁰ and in the mutual conversation and consolation of the priesthood of all believers. This should become an intentional time for catechesis in the home – for reflection upon what the Supper means to us as the church, and how the assembly is integral to what it means to be disciples of our Lord.

Some have termed this response an intentional sacrifice of "eucharistic fasting" in the context of the self-emptying love described earlier.⁴¹ It is important to understand that this is not a case of the church intentionally withholding Christ's Supper from the people, nor of the people abstaining from Holy Communion in the sense of refusing or despising it.⁴² What we are facing is a circumstance of deprivation that has been imposed upon us, and there are manifest biblical and confessional boundaries that we must respect as stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1).

A return to "normality" will undoubtedly occur in gradual stages. Provinces, states and cities are shifting in and out of lockdown at different paces and different times. "Stay at home" orders will end, but various degrees of "social distancing," whether formal or informal, will persist. In this developing situation, there is no uniform answer to the question, "When – and how – should we commune?" Given these shifting circumstances, our pastors have the responsibility and the freedom to alter their standard practices for the sake of spiritual care, provided any decisions fall within the brackets of sound doctrine and liturgical practice.⁴³

On one level, the biblical and confessional witness outlined above clearly demarcates the scope of these boundaries. *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.* There must be a public, bodily assembly

⁴⁰ Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church," in LW 41:150.

⁴¹ See Hinlicky, "Virtual Communion."

⁴² LC V:49, in BC, 452.

⁴³ See Hinlicky, "Virtual Communion."

of those whom Christ has brought into His Body by Baptism. There must be shared bread and wine, which are distributed and received, eaten and drunk. On the other hand, variations in the size of the assembly and the extent of the distribution lie within the boundaries of Christ's institution and are left open by Scripture. Throughout the history of the church, these have been adapted and varied in Christian freedom. For example, to distribute the bread and wine shared according to Christ's command to those who are genuinely unable to gather with the congregation is not the same thing as foregoing altogether the eating of the "one bread" and the drinking from "this cup" according to Christ's commandment. The variables are therefore somewhat open to the freedom of pastoral care.

In locations where authorities have lifted or relaxed social restrictions, parishes may decide to hold services of smaller size, in adherence to the laws and guidelines of their respective areas. For those who are truly unable to attend under the rubrics of those same guidelines, another possibility would be some variation of an extended distribution within a specified timeframe by the pastor or trained lay Communion ministers using a rite similar to the "Distribution in Special Circumstances" from the *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW) Occasional Services*. Out of concern for the protection and wellbeing of the neighbor, adherence to strict social distancing guidelines would need to be observed for this to be viable. Where stay-at-home laws remain categorically in force, for instance, congregations will need to continue to refrain from Holy Communion.

These respective models of smaller services, extensions of a single assembly in the same category as a typical distribution to the sick or home bound, or refraining from the Sacrament altogether, are recognizable, orthodox alternatives for those parishes currently practicing "virtual Communion." They do not engage in or profess an act of remote consecration, so they do not employ the Words of Institution in "a different, new, and strange sense."⁴⁴ They are also obvious interim measures, acceptable exceptions with little to no chance of challenging the norm of the gathered church in the long run.

An abiding principle of the Reformation is the admonition that we in the Lutheran movement "are not minded to manufacture anything new" in doctrine or practice.⁴⁵ This obligation underscores the biblical, traditional grounding that keeps our congregational focus on the person and Word of Christ. The practice of "virtual" or "tele-communion" in terms of remote consecration is a clear departure from this principle; and the church has no authority to diverge from the Lord's command in the administration of the Sacraments, whether for reasons pragmatic or pastoral. Obedience to the Gospel therefore affords us no compromise in the matter.

⁴⁴ FC:SD, Art. VII:113, in BC, 589.

⁴⁵ Preface to BC, 13.

POSITION PAPER #2:

WHY AND HOW TO SHARE COMMUNION IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The Gospel of Jesus is good and true and stunningly beautiful – no less so in a time of pandemic. During this time, many pastors and congregations are choosing to share Communion in our homes, led by our pastors at a distance. We are sharing Communion in this way in order to give one another Christ and His benefits, to communicate the presence and promise of Jesus. In Communion, Jesus speaks to our fears and gives us hope. He speaks to our sin and gives us grace. He speaks to our mortality and gives us life, now and forever. During this time when many of us are lonely and longing even for physical contact with others, this is a Gospel opportunity to be touched physically by Jesus and united with His family.

Distance Communion is not “virtual Communion,” a term that prejudices the discussion from the outset. Pastors are leading a Communion liturgy by video, including the Words of Institution, and sharing that video synchronously or asynchronously to their congregations who have prepared bread and wine ahead of time in their homes.

Some object to these practices and understand them to violate the nature of the Sacrament. We offer this document to the pastors, members and congregations of the NALC to explain the biblical and confessional foundations that undergird this practice and to offer some guidance for other churches who choose to do the same.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

It would be possible, of course, simply to preach the Word of the Gospel without sharing Communion. The Word alone, without the Sacrament, is enough to give people Christ and His benefits. The Sacrament isn't *necessary* in that sense. But that's asking the wrong question. Every non-denominational evangelical Christian knows that the bare Word is enough. We, on the other hand, are Word and Sacrament Christians. We know that Jesus gave us the oral Word *and* the embodied Word. Thank God! He doesn't just tell us in our thoughts that we are forgiven and in our imaginations that we have died with Him to be raised again to life in the Spirit. He gives us Baptism to wash our bodies with water and raises us out of the depths. He doesn't only tell us that He died for us to establish a new covenant in His blood. He gives us the Lord's Supper to feed us bread and wine, which, together with His Word, are His body and blood given and shed for us. We may not *have to* share Communion now, but we get to. The Lord's Supper is so much more than a necessity. It is a life-giving gift.

It is important to understand that these forms of distance Communion stand in faithful and flexible continuity with the many forms in which Christians have shared Communion in the New Testament period and throughout the ages. Jesus' own Last Supper with His disciples was a

Passover meal. It was in that context that He shared bread and wine and said to them “Do this in remembrance of me.” We know less about the details of their subsequent practice in the first decades of Christian history than we might wish, but what we know provides healthy precedent for our practice today. We know that the risen Jesus made Himself known to two disciples on the road to Emmaus when He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to them (Luke 24:30-35). We know that the first Christian communities in the book of Acts continued to break bread together in their homes with glad and sincere hearts (Acts 2:46). We know that the several Corinthian assemblies shared a cup and bread that was also a participation in the blood and body of Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17). We also know that these meals were sometimes shared inequitably along dividing lines of social class (1 Cor 11:20-22) and that this economic discrimination at the table was a dangerous failure to discern the body of Christ (1 Cor 11:27-29). In subsequent eras Christians took an historic leap to move their worship out of homes into church buildings and cathedrals. They transformed a shared meal and table fellowship into a distribution of small elements. Over the years, and in different places, Communion has been shared with leavened or unleavened bread, wafers, common cup, individual cups, pouring chalices, and many other forms and with greatly varying frequency. All our churches have long since departed from the literal forms of the Last Supper, yet without becoming unfaithful to the practice Jesus gave us.

So what did Jesus mean when He said to do *this* in remembrance of me? Why can we trust that in these many variations in form, including such dramatic transformations over the years and in the use of digital media now, Jesus continues to give us His body and blood and the forgiveness of our sins? Because it is the Word of Jesus that makes bread and wine into Communion. Along with followers of Jesus in the New Testament and consistent with the interpretation of the Lutheran Reformers, we believe that the bread and wine of Communion are not determined by any of these external criteria. The bread and wine of Communion are the bread and wine that are connected with the Gospel Word of Jesus. So Luther explains to pastors in his *Large Catechism*, “It is true, indeed, that if you take the Word away from the 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 by virtue of them the elements are truly the body and blood of Christ (LC V.14).” We know that the Word of God is present and effective wherever it is spoken and heard, even when it is electronically amplified or when it is carried over wire and wave. The Word of God is not bound, as we stubborn Christians have needed to be reminded from the very beginning. If the Word is effective in those who hear it to convict and forgive their sins and to raise the dead to life, then we believe that it is also effective to give us who are gathered the gift of the Lord’s Supper in bread and wine (more on “gathering” below).

Pastors play an important role in the ministry of Word and Sacrament, but the physical presence of the clergy is not the essential issue in Communion, including distance Communion. Naturally we’d all prefer to be together physically (again, see below), but the pastor’s role is one that can be executed faithfully at a distance when needed. In describing ordained ministry, the Augsburg Confession says, “That we may obtain this faith the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through

instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear (CA 5).” So we faithfully preach and teach the Gospel, in Word and Sacrament, and the Holy Spirit kindles faith in them that hear, where and when it pleases God.

The Communion meal of bread and wine, together with the Word of Jesus, is meant to be shared together in community with the Lord’s Church. The Bible teaches us that it is not a private, individual devotional practice. At the very beginning Jesus gave this supper to a gathering of His disciples. The stories in the book of Acts, though admittedly quite different from our own practices, tell us that the growing church broke bread together in their homes. In one of St. Paul’s very few extant references to the Lord’s Supper he begins by addressing the “meetings” of the Corinthians “when they come together.” This assumption is shared by the Formula of Concord: “Christ’s command ‘Do this’ ... includes the entire action or administration of the Sacrament: 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 (FC SD VII.84).”⁴⁶

All of this requires us to think well about the nature of digital community. Some will accept it uncritically; others will dismiss it too glibly. The reality is more nuanced than either extreme, as digitally native generations are demonstrating to be true. They connect frequently in digital space but still desire strongly to share physical community. They move fluidly between the two modes of engagement, and often share both at the same time. It was common in the “prehistoric” chat rooms of the 1990’s to use the acronym “irl,” suggesting that something was going to happen “in real life” and not online. There’s a reason almost no one under 40 knows that reference. Real people are interacting with real people, none of whom ceases to be an embodied creature when they interact digitally. They are experiencing real emotions and forging real relationships with other real humans who really are part of their real lives. To deny this is to detach oneself from the lived reality of multitudes and effectively to exit the conversation in the 21st century.

But to say that digital community is real, and not “virtual,” is not to say that it is complete or that it is enough for us. We long for physical gatherings and physical touch, to stand shoulder to shoulder, to sit in the same rows and kneel at the same rails, to shake hands and hug whenever we allow ourselves to do these things again. Nor does it mean that we can afford to ignore the manifold dangers of contemporary media. This discussion is one that needs to embrace careful both-and thinking, not either-or dichotomies. Digital community is here to augment physical community, not replace it. Christian leaders should not quit the field of play and abandon our flocks

⁴⁶ Some quote this same passage to oppose distance Communion, as if the “entire action” were not being shared, but this is taking the Reformers’ argument out of context. The argument in context is that the bread should not be “locked up, made into a sacrifice, or carried around in procession” but consumed by the people after consecration (FC SD VII.83). That’s why they had to emphasize the acts of distributing and eating in their congregations. It’s obvious to most people now, but actually *eating* the meal is part of the “entire act.” We proponents of distance communion are not holding back bread and wine from the people. This passage would be a much more relevant protest against those who would now practice “spiritual Communion,” wherein the clergy consecrate and consume the elements while others observe and pray but do not receive and eat.

to experience digital life under the influence of those who neither know nor serve the Gospel. Some will object that the medium is the message, but to make this claim in defense of traditional media against contemporary media is naïve. It imagines that there are some media and forms that have survived the Fall unscathed.

The community, the assembly, the *ekklesia* that gathers to share Communion in digital space is *really* and not virtually the Church of Jesus Christ, as we who believe in the communion of saints ought to have known all along. But it cannot be all there is to the Church. This experience of the church is a two-edged sword. It is both encouraging and also disturbing. We are nurtured in the Sacrament, and we taste our unity with other brothers and sisters. We are at the same time reminded of our frailty, our mortality, and our even greater need for one another. We hunger for a fuller manifestation of the church, perhaps as the apostle Paul hungered to see his churches face to face even as he celebrated the opportunity to share letters with them, and as even the meals in our sanctuaries teach us to hunger for the greater Feast that is yet to come.

When we share Communion in our homes, led digitally by our pastors at a distance, we share an embodied reception of the Gospel. Our bodies are not in the same room as all the other bodies, and this calls for lament but not retreat. We have not ceased to be embodied creatures or to receive the gift of the body of Christ in our bodies. The Lord's Supper, as an embodied means of grace, delivers the Gospel to our whole integrated selves just as God intended. And the Gospel is not just redemptive of our thoughts or cognitive dispositions of "faith." It is redemptive of our whole embodied selves, as it is redemptive of God's whole created cosmos. Perhaps we should not worry that Communion in digital community is disincarnate but that those who insist on sharing only the spoken Word have unwittingly reflected a more dangerously gnostic anthropology than anyone realized, along with many other American Christians.

The Gospel of Jesus is more beautiful and powerful than we ever think it is going to be. We never would have predicted that the Word of God would become flesh and dwell among us, but He did. We could not have imagined that the body of Christ would hang on a cross for us, but He did. First generation church leaders couldn't tolerate that the Gospel would reach us Gentiles who make up so much of the Lord's church today, but He saved us nonetheless. In the book of Acts the Holy Spirit continues to push the Gospel of Jesus into new territory beckoning the church to keep up. This present hurdle is smaller than many that the Lord has cleared before. God grant that we may have the faith and vision to follow.

GUIDANCE FOR SHARING COMMUNION IN DIGITAL COMMUNITY

Pastors are called by God to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments with discernment in their own contexts. We humbly offer the following suggestions for your consideration:

- Position your congregation's celebration of the Lord's Supper in roughly the same liturgical context you normally use. For example, although neither the Bible nor the Confessions require a formal liturgy of Confession and Absolution, nor the saying of the Lord's prayer,

tradition and common practice strongly suggest the maintenance of these and other similar elements that serve evangelical worship in your congregations.

- This is a great opportunity to teach the Lord's Supper in your congregation. Under normal circumstances we suffer from the luxury of getting to do what we have always done without having to think about it or explain it. This season offers a tremendous window of opportunity for catechesis. Consider how your congregations can grow in their understanding of the Lord's Supper and their reception of the Gospel in this time for their long-term benefit.
- Give very practical guidance to your people in preparing the elements. Some congregations have shared their normal Communion bread recipe, so that even the flavor of Communion will remind members of their fellowship with one another – and to long for its restoration. You might suggest to people that they give consideration to a plate or cup(s) they would choose for the elements to help them prepare for the Sacrament with a measure of prayerful intentionality. Offer guidance for families with children in accordance with the practices of your congregation and also suggestions for what to do with leftover elements.

Our theology and practices of Communion involve a number of constructive tensions. The balance in those tensions may well have shifted in these new circumstances. Consider the needs of your people with these and other theological and practical tensions in mind:

- **The individual and the community.** In Communion each individual partakes of the bread and the cup. The promise is applied to each of us personally. We are reminded that Jesus didn't only die for the sins of the world "out there" in the abstract. He died for me and my sins. And yet, we are not mere individuals. Communion is personal, but it is not private. God's glory is not the small glory of being "my" God. His majesty is as the God of all people, of every tribe and tongue. And, our duties are not to ourselves but to one another in the Body of Christ, locally and globally. *How is this tension operating in your context? How might you lead your people to encounter God personally, and also to avoid the anonymity and individualism that plagues us both now and in our larger gatherings?*
- **Subjective experience and objective truth.** It's obvious to some and odious to others, but our subjective experiences matter to God. They are a meaningful consideration in sharing Communion. The Bible in general teaches us to believe, in the lament psalms for one excellent example, that the God of heaven and earth cares when we are hurting. Luke bothers to tell readers of Acts that when the first Christians broke bread together in their homes they did so with glad and sincere hearts. Martin Luther, not generally accused of post-modern subjectivism, explained this in the *Large Catechism*, "The devil is a furious enemy; when he sees that we resist him and attack the old creature, and when he cannot rout us by force, he sneaks and skulks about at every turn, trying all kinds of tricks, and does not stop until he has finally worn us out so that we either renounce our faith or lose heart and become indifferent or impatient. For times like these, when our heart feels too sorely pressed, this comfort of the Lord's Supper is given to bring us new strength and

refreshment (LC V.26-27).” How the “heart feels” is an important consideration. And yet, the subjective feelings of the heart do not make the Sacrament. It is real, true, valid and powerful regardless of the condition of my heart. The Word of the Gospel in the Lord’s Supper is an objective truth that we need, whether we feel like it or not. It would be better to ask how the Lord’s Supper convicts, forgives, redeems and forms our affections than to think that it depends on them. *How is this tension operating in your context? How might you help your people bring their whole selves to Communion and there receive the embodied Word of Jesus for their redemption?*

- **Transcendence and immanence.** By transcendence we mean to describe the holiness, majesty, grandeur and awesome “otherness” of God. By immanence we mean the nearness, tenderness and approachability of God who comes to us by the miracle of Incarnation and continues to offer Himself to us in simple bread and wine. In our most beautiful sanctuaries we hold fast to transcendence and may, in some cases, lose immanence. In our living rooms we will inevitably tip toward immanence and put transcendence at risk. *How is this tension operating in your context? How might you help your people cultivate awe, wonder and reverence in their current circumstances?*