

Communion in a Time of Social Distancing
“When You Come Together to Eat, Wait for One Another”

As we write, a pandemic threatens the health of billions. The disease suddenly has affected personal lives, communities, organizations, economies and civil governments across the planet. New and occasionally drastic changes have been made. For many Christian congregations, this means stopping the gathering for worship.

Churches have adjusted swiftly. Many have turned to technology. They post recorded messages and written devotions, and they stream services to viewers in their homes. Some have proposed this technology be used also for the administration of the Lord’s Supper. The common idea is that the pastor conducts a Service of the Sacrament from one location, the viewers follow the service from other locations, and all of them eat and drink the body and blood of Christ when the pastor directs them.

This proposal reflects the desire to give pastoral care in a difficult time and acknowledge the importance of the Sacrament for this care. We commend both this desire and this acknowledgement. But the proposal about administering the Lord’s Supper in the context of streamed services is problematic, and we cannot commend this solution to the problem.

The problem with this proposal is that it would alter what happens in the Lord’s Supper itself. The action of the Lord’s Supper would be changed substantially. The change lies in eliminating what might be called the “communal meal aspect” of the Sacrament. Here, the term “communal meal” means a meal where several come together for the purpose of sharing in eating common food. As Christ instituted and commanded it, the Sacrament of the Altar is a communal meal.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:23–26).

As the Words of Institution show, the Lord’s Supper is when several come together to share in eating and drinking Christ’s body and blood under bread and wine. They share in common not only the action of eating and drinking but also the food and the drink. In this way, the many become one: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). This is how the Lord’s Supper has a “communal meal aspect.” It is this communal meal aspect that shows why the Lord’s Supper is rightly called “Holy Communion.”

The proposal does something different. It lacks the communal meal aspect. Instead of several coming together to share in eating and drinking, the several stay apart and eat and drink on their own. The viewers do not share in a meal. Rather, they are expected to provide their own meals and to eat and drink their meals on their own. To be sure, the eating and drinking are coordinated. But they are not communal. The food and drink are not shared.

The difference is like that between a family supper and lunchtime at a school cafeteria. In a family supper, the members of the family come together to share food and drink with each other and for each other. They come together and live as a family in their meal together. At lunchtime in a school cafeteria, students come together, but not all to share the same meal. Some bring theirs from home, others get theirs from the school kitchen, and occasionally a student doesn't eat because she left her lunch at home. They eat together, and the lunch period may bring some together, but they do not come together in the eating itself.

Someone may ask whether the communal meal aspect is essential to the Lord's Supper. The question is well taken, at least for those who use communion wafers or individual cups. One could argue that either of these counts as changing the rite, and then further argue that the communal meal aspect of the Sacrament is on par with these, rather than with the use of bread and wine or the Words of Institution.

The apostle Paul shows us that the communal meal aspect of the Lord's Supper is essential in 1 Corinthians. Here Paul *assumes* that the Lord's Supper is a kind of communal meal. His criticism of the Corinthians is based on the assumed fact that the Lord's Supper is a meal where several come together to share in eating and drinking common food and drink.

In 1 Corinthians 10:14–22, Paul teaches that communicants are made one by receiving the common food and drink. The many are made one body in the Lord's Supper because there is one bread. Paul also notes that eating food sacrificed at pagan altars makes all who eat this food one with each other, too. It is sharing this food together in meals like this — meals intended to bring people together — that makes eating meat sacrificed to false gods problematic, indeed, idolatrous. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul criticizes the Corinthians for the way they conduct the Lord's Supper. This is because they deny the communal meal aspect.

“When you come together [to the same place],” Paul observes, “it is not the Lord's supper that you eat [it is not in order to eat the Lord's Supper]. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal [his own supper]. One goes hungry, another gets drunk” (1 Cor. 11:20–21). In any communal meal this would be sinful, because “one goes hungry, another gets drunk.” But with this communal meal, where Christ's body and blood are eaten and drunk, one sins not only against brothers and sisters in Christ but against Christ's body and blood (1 Cor. 11:27–29). Therefore he urges: “So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another” (1 Cor. 11:33).

Since the communal meal aspect of the Lord's Supper was essential for the Apostle, who had received instruction from the Lord Himself, it should be for our administration of the Lord's Supper. Streaming Communion service proposals eliminate this essential feature of the Sacrament. This is why it is problematic.

Someone else might suggest that what happens is not one Communion service, but many conducted at the same time. This amounts to a different proposal, but it would be problematic for reasons of the church and the public ministry. This proposal in effect dissolves one congregation and establishes many in its place. This might be contemplated, but it is certainly a drastic measure. This proposal also raises the question of who serves as the called and ordained servant of the Word in each location. Contrary to what may be assumed or claimed, a pastor being streamed into a home is not conducting the Lord's Supper in each home, because he is not present for the communal meal. Additionally, he is unable to provide pastoral oversight and care to those eating and drinking. At the same time, attempting to live-stream a Communion service differs fundamentally from the celebration of Communion in a shut-in's home or hospital room. With shut-ins, hospital visits, and similar cases, all who commune are present together, including the pastor to administer the Sacrament directly.

We could deal with other questions and alternatives, and perhaps we will on another occasion. But it is more important to attend to the desire to give pastoral care in this and other difficult situations. Again, we commend this desire, and we support all congregations and pastors seeking to strengthen the faith of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Moreover, God is for us in this effort, because He Himself shows His grace and strengthens faith through His Word. Faith is strengthened whenever Christians let the Word of God dwell richly among them (Col 3:16). When public worship is not possible, there are still recorded and printed sermons. In each home, the Scriptures can be read, God be praised in song, and intercessions for the world be made. The present situation thus provides an opportunity to help Christians to either strengthen or reestablish the practice of family devotions. To this end, one can equip them with resources such as the 2017 Small Catechism (Concordia Publishing House). Here one might model for them via social media how to use its "Central Thoughts" for a brief family reflection and discussion that then concludes with the prayer provided for each section. In this way we might recapture the catechism's use as a personal prayer book. In any case, we can remember and rejoice in this: "At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints" (LC 1,92, KW 399).

Many of us will have to forgo for a while being gathered together to hear the Word of God, receive the Lord's Supper, and join our voices in praise, thanksgiving and prayer. This happens regularly for individuals through illness. Now, because of illness, it is happening to us all at once. While the church endures this time of difficult physical separation, we wait with patient hope as so many other faithful followers of Christ have done before us in times of trial, whether in seasons of persecution, exile or plague. Our Lord is with His church and sustains, guides and unites us until the day He mercifully frees us to gather with one another again.

Adopted by the Departments of Systematic Theology of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne on 2 April 2020.

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Quotation of the Large Catechism is from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

For Further Study and Use:

For a further explanation of the connection between the pastoral office and the administration of the Lord's Supper, see the joint statement by the Departments of Systematic Theology of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, "The Office of the Holy Ministry," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 70 (2006): 97–111, and *Concordia Journal* 33 (2007): 242–55; also available at: concordiatheology.org/2013/01/the-office-of-the-holy-ministry/.

For a discussion about other questions about the Lord's Supper in the present situation, see "Communion and Covid-19," a statement from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 20 March 2020, available at files.lcms.org/wl/?id=F64Yu9xwsZKeXMxfXEvRCQK6EaEBqSkw.

Many materials and resources for devotions, study and ministry have been made available during the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak. For example, Concordia Publishing House has made material for devotions and studying scripture freely available on its webpage cph.org, and Lutheran Hour Ministries has ministry resources for COVID-19 at lhm.org/covid-19/.