



## Communion in Homes During Times of Crisis

### Scriptural and Confessional Principles

Friday, April 3, 2020

The spread of COVID-19 has radically shifted the way we interact, work, and worship. States and municipalities across the nation have implemented “shelter-in-place” orders that have shuttered businesses and have prevented – or at least severely inhibited – the ability of Christian congregations to meet for worship. Many churches have turned to streaming their services online so that Christ’s people can continue to be edified by the preaching of the Word. But such a solution to our current situation still leaves people without the blessing of the Lord’s Supper – a central part of Christian worship.

Out of an abundance of concern for God’s people, who should not be left bereft of this sacred gift, some pastors in our Synod have invited their congregants to partake of the Lord’s Supper in their homes – a practice that was supported by Martin Luther himself:

*Those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names **and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the Sacrament, and to do other Christian works.** (AE 53 63)*

This practice is also rooted in the antecedent to the Lord’s Supper, the Passover, which, from its inception, was celebrated in homes:

*The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt...“Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household...You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight. Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of **the houses in which they eat it**...The blood shall be a sign for you, **on the houses where you are.** And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 12:1, 3, 6-7, 13)*

It was with these things in mind that, during many online Divine Services over the past few weeks, some of our pastors, being careful to offer appropriate instruction before the Sacrament so that those partaking could be properly prepared, invited Christ’s people, while in their homes, to speak the Words of Institution with them and share in the gifts of Christ’s body and blood for the forgiveness of sins.



Many of us who offered Communion in this way have received questions – and even some criticism – concerning our practice. Moreover, our Synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations recently published an opinion (<https://files.lcms.org/wl/?id=F64Yu9xwsZKeXMxfXEvRCQK6EaEBgSkw>) in which they expressed concern over celebrating the Lord’s Supper in this way. In light of these questions and concerns, we wanted to, in the spirit of fraternal discussion and edification, share some of the Scriptural and Confessional principles that guided our decision-making.

**First, we believe that it is appropriate to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, even while faithful participants may be in different physical locations, because the gifts offered in Christ’s body and blood are not based on our locations, but in wherever Christ has promised to be present.**

Christ, though He willingly became incarnate *in* space and time, is not bound *by* space or time. As Christ Himself promises to those who pray in His name:

*Where two or three are gathered in My name, **there am I among them.*** (Matthew 18:20)

And, as He promises to His disciples when He commissions them to baptize and teach:

*Behold, **I am with you always, to the end of the age.*** (Matthew 28:20)

Such verses are part of the reason we believe that Christ’s body and blood can be in, with, and under the bread and wine wherever the gospel is rightly preached and the Sacraments are faithfully administered – whether this be in a cathedral, in a field, or in a home. We reject the arguments of those like Ulrich Zwingli who asserted that the doctrine of Christ’s omnipresence applies only to His deity and not to His humanity and thus, because Christ is now enthroned in heaven, His body and blood cannot be truly present in His Supper. In one famous exchange between Luther and Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy, the latter implored, “Prove, I pray, that the body of Christ can be in many places.” Luther replied tersely, “This is My body” (See Herman Sasse, *This is My Body*, 258). Location is not an obstacle for Christ.

In the traditional Communion liturgy, we confess that, in this celebration, we join “with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven.” If heaven can meet earth in Communion, we can be bound together on earth by Communion, even when we are apart. Luther makes this point when he writes concerning Christ’s command to celebrate His Supper in remembrance of Him:

*It is as if He would say by these words, “I institute a Passover or Supper for you. You shall enjoy it not only once a year, just upon this evening, but often, when and where you will,*



*according to everyone's opportunity and necessity, **bound to no place or appointed time.**" (LC 5 47)*

Luther is right. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is not bound to an appointed place or time because Christ is not bound to an appointed place or time. He is present wherever He promises to be.

**Second, we believe that it is appropriate for both pastor and people to speak the Words of Institution in the celebration of Communion because the words and gifts of Christ are given to the whole Church.**

The apostle Paul, in admonishing the Corinthians over their abuses in their celebrations of the Lord's Supper, writes:

***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."*** (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

Paul freely delivers the Words of Institution to the Corinthian congregation, even while admonishing them, because he has had them freely delivered to him by Christ. These words are not just Paul's words. They are first and foremost Christ's words. He delivers them to Paul, who, in turn, delivers them to all of God's people. These words, then, belong to all who receive them in repentance and faith, which is to say, to all those in the true Church. This is why Paul finally writes:

***For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.*** ( 1 Corinthians 11:26)

Christ's words and work are to be the whole Church's proclamation.

Similarly, the apostle Paul also writes of the Lord's Supper one chapter earlier in his letter to the Corinthians:

***The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*** (1 Corinthians 10:16)

Notice that Paul says the blessing spoken over the cup is a blessing that "we" say. The pronoun does not just refer to a singular pastor, but to the people of God. The words and prayers surrounding Communion belong to all of God's people.



Martin Luther echoes the apostle Paul's confession about to whom the words and prayers of the Lord's Supper belongs when he writes:

*There is no other Word of God than that which is given all Christians to proclaim. There is no other baptism than the one which any Christian can bestow. **There is no other remembrance of the Lord's Supper than that which any Christian can observe and which Christ has instituted.** (AE 40 34-35)*

Likewise, our Synod's Brief Statement agrees, along with Paul and Luther, that the Lord's Supper is given to the whole Church:

*Since the Christians are the Church, it is self-evident that they alone originally possess the spiritual gifts and rights which Christ has gained for, and given to, His Church. Thus St. Paul reminds all believers: "All things are yours," 1 Cor. 3:21, 22, and Christ Himself commits to all believers the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Matt. 16:13-19, 18:17-20; John 20:22, 23, and **commissions all believers to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments**, Matt. 28:19, 20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25. (Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod, par. 30)*

The gift that Christ gives to the whole Church in His Supper, with its Words of Institution and attendant prayers, in no way conflicts with or undermines our confession concerning Christ's institution of the pastoral office or our concern with good order in the Church, as outlined by our Confessions:

*So that we may obtain this faith [in Christ], the ministry of teaching the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments was instituted. (AC V)*

And:

*Our churches teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church, or administer the Sacraments, without a rightly ordered call. (AC XIV)*

In the Divine Services that have been celebrated online among our Synodical congregations, a rightly called minister of the Gospel has presided over the Sacrament, inviting his congregants to speak the Words of Institution *with* him – not *instead of* him. Careful pastoral care and responsible pastoral oversight have been exercised as our pastors have called upon their people to follow the apostle Paul's guidance and heed his warning to the Corinthians:

*Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ( 1 Corinthians 11:28-29)*



If a person has not been properly prepared to receive Christ's body and blood through repentance, discernment, and faith, or if they have been reluctant to receive the Sacrament in their home, they have been invited to receive a blessing instead.

Pastors who have led their congregants in the reception of Communion in their homes have taken extensive measures to be responsible to their vocations as "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Corinthians 4:1) by exercising faithful pastoral care. We do not see any reason, therefore, why a congregation cannot join in saying Christ's words, which He has given to His whole Church, with its pastor.

**Third, we believe that the promise and certainty of the Lord's Supper is not found in the mere recitation of a certain set of words. Nor is it found in the physical space in which a set of words is spoken. The promise and certainty of the Lord's Supper is found *in Christ and Christ's Word alone.***

God, through the prophet Isaiah, says of the certainty and power of His Word:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but **it shall accomplish that which I purpose**, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10-11)*

What is true of God's Word, the Gospels demonstrate, is also true of Christ's Word, which is, in fact, one and the same as God's Word. This is why Christ's Word always accomplishes what it purposes. When Christ says to a bleeding woman, "Be healed of your disease," (Mark 5:34), she is healed of her disease. When Christ says to a paralyzed man, "Take heart, My son; your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2), his sins are forgiven. Christ's Word is so powerful that it can work even remotely. When a centurion who has a deathly ill servant at home meets Jesus, the centurion says to Him, "Lord, I am not worthy to have You come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed." Jesus responds, "Go; let it be done for you as you have believed" (Matthew 8:8, 13), and the servant is healed. Thus, when Christ says, "This is My body," and "This is My blood" (Matthew 26:26-28), we believe that His body and blood are truly present in, with, and under the bread and the wine in His Supper.

The assurance that Christ's Word brings is at the heart of our Confessions' unwavering emphasis on the centrality of the Word in our celebrations of the Sacrament. When Luther marvels at how the simple eating and drinking that happens in the Lord's Supper can do such great things like offer forgiveness for sin, he explains this can only happen because of:



*...the words, which are given here, "Given...and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." **These words** are, beside the bodily eating and drinking, the chief thing in the Sacrament. The person who believes **these words** has what they say and express, namely, the forgiveness of sins. ( SC VI)*

Likewise, in his Large Catechism, Luther writes:

***It is the Word, I say, that makes and sets the Sacrament apart.** So it is not mere bread and wine, but is, and is called, Christ's body and blood. (LC V 10)*

This efficacy of the Word is why we, as Lutherans, have historically considered the Words of Institution as vital to our celebrations of the Sacrament:

*We believe, teach, and confess unanimously that in the use of the Holy Supper **the words of Christ's institution should in no way be left out.** Instead, they should be publicly recited. (Epitome VII 9)*

At the same time, these words must never become a mystical mechanism by which we attempt to conjure Christ. He is present in His Supper because of His promise and power, given to us through His Word, and not because of our actions. Again, to quote our Confessions:

*Now, about the consecration, we believe, teach, and confess that no work of man or recitation of the minister produces this presence of Christ's body and blood in the Holy Supper. Instead, **his presence is to be credited only to the almighty power of our Lord Jesus Christ.** (Epitome VII 8)*

Thus, we agree with the Commission on Theology and Church Relations when they state that in no way should the Words of Institution:

*...spoken by the pastor [be turned] from a proclamation into an incantation of sorts.*

We are concerned, however, that the Commission's stipulations concerning precisely where these words must be spoken are in grave danger of turning these words into the kind of incantation the Commission says it rejects. We have difficulty understanding how an insistence that a certain set of words be spoken by a certain person in a certain space can be conceived of as anything other than the very definition of an incantation. Indeed, the Commission actually concludes that if the Words of Institution are not spoken in the same physical space as a congregation, the presence of Christ's body and blood cannot be assured:

*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.*

We cannot agree with this conclusion. The history of our own Synod shows that we have made use of nearly every imaginable technological resource available to us – from radio to television to, now, online streaming – to share Christ's Word with our world. A faithful permutation of Christ's Word – whether this be in the form of a translation of the Scriptures, or in the form of an interpretation of these same Scriptures in a sermon, or in the form of an electronic proclamation of the Scriptures – does not blunt the force of Christ's Word. His Word is powerful and carries with it all of God's promises wherever and however it is spoken or, for that matter, written. What is true of the Scriptures as a whole is also true of the many and various sections of the Scriptures, which would include those sections from which we derive the Words of Institution.

We are left with a choice. On the one hand, we can cease celebrating the Lord's Supper during this pandemic because our Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations has issued an opinion that celebrating the Supper in homes while a pastor speaks Christ's words over an online stream while his congregation joins in is inappropriate – a practice that, in our own opinion, is nowhere forbidden by Scripture or the Confessions. On the other hand, while respectfully engaging with and listening to those who disagree with our position, we can continue celebrating the Lord's Supper so that God's people may receive with joy all that this meal promises and delivers, heeding Christ's clear command:

*Do this in remembrance of Me. (Luke 22:19)*

For these reasons, after thoughtful contemplation and prayerful consideration, we humbly, confidently, and faithfully intend to continue to obey Christ's command to celebrate His Supper.