

Live-Streaming Communion?

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Is Communion via Live- Stream Communion?

One of the big ecclesiological questions that arises as Christians have moved into isolation is whether communion can be served via live-streaming. While it is an understandable pastoral desire, this introduces some major questions about the nature of the sacrament. The following are my reflections on this issue based on my years of theological research into the nature of symbols, imagination, and technology.

The Church is the Body of Christ (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12)

Church is not made up of individuals who share common faith-statements, but the people chosen by God and empowered by his Holy Spirit to do his will of reconciling all things to himself (Eph. 1, Rom. 8). When church moves to online media only, it runs the risk of perpetuating the false belief that church is an institution that exists to provide services to individuals. The church does not exist to provide content to aid individuals in their spiritual journey, but to lead individuals into reconciled relationships with God, one another, and God's creation by

without physically is Gnosticism. But although few pastors would ever want an online-only church, there is a risk in our culture that this moment of isolation leads to new habits and new understandings of the body of Christ that have already been present in other expressions of isolated Christians believing that watching sermons or services online is a suitable replacement. Maybe it's not true where you live, but in my area (Colorado) getting people to understand the value of gathering together and sharing life together is already incredibly difficult. The general spirituality in my area wavers between disembodied spirituality, and pantheism. Many a mountain biker will post an image of riding a bike on Sunday morning with the hashtag #church. And Christians in my area are not immune to this!

The body means incarnate (in the flesh)

Christians have always and everywhere held that God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Jesus expects us to be his continuing presence in the world. As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus in the same way sends us empowered by the same Spirit (John 20:21). If we hold that Jesus was the real presence of God in our midst at a specific place and time in history, so too we must be the real presence of the body of Christ together in a specific place and time in history. The Lord's Supper/Eucharist/Communion is a celebration of the presence of God in our midst as we are together made into the body of Christ.

Online church is not an expression of incarnation,

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“Virtual” originally meant that something had the essence or character of something, but wasn’t formally recognized as such. So, if someone is virtually a dictator, it means that they have all of the attributes of a dictator, but isn’t called one. With the invention of computers this concept became applied to many computerized simulations. I, and other theologians like David Bentley Hart, have noted that after a few generations of living within a computerized world, our imaginations have become inverted. Now we have begun to see “memory” through the lens of the simulation rather than the original. “Virtual memory” means that computers have all of the characteristics of human memory, but without being human. But that’s not true. Computers store and transmit *digitally* through binary code. Computers reduce everything to zeroes and ones or on and off. Human memory is storied, living, rich, embodied. We believe that reality is not simply the complex interactions of electrical pulses between moving atoms. This is an ancient belief shared between Greek philosophies of Epicureanism and Atomism. As Christians, we believe in a Creator, and we believe we are his creatures, along with all others. We can only know God rightly if we live as his creatures, reconciled with our Creator. This involves rich, embodied relationships.

My wife is English, and though we met at school and had known each other for a couple of years, we had to spend a year in a mostly online-relationship when I had to return to America after my student visa expired. That long-distance relationship was difficult. When we would be reunited temporarily, it was usually very awkward at first. Even though we talked most every day, the real presence was strange and forgotten. After we got married, we also had to spend much of our first year of marriage apart due to immigration laws and the sluggish system. The same happened again. Although we were married, distance made us feel strange for a time. We were still committed to each other, certainly (and that’s what marriage and the church of covenanted partnership means!). We even joked that the song that should play at our wedding

say that, had our correspondence been only via letters in a pre-Skype era, it would have felt less simulated, because the absence was far more obvious. As Paul often links marriage and the church, so here I think it is fitting to use that analogy. We never felt like the symbolic actions of unity in marriage were appropriate over Skype. We even talked about “Skype kisses” that were never to be allowed again when we had the real presence.

Just like my years of online dating and marriage were caused not by choice but by law outside of our control, the church is in a period of absence. Of course it would be silly for my wife and I to not have contact in our absence. But it would have been equally strange if we had believed that our simulated presence was anything more than a simulation. That’s not to say that temporarily providing messages to congregations is bad. But we must remind people that this is a simulation. Just as many of us explain the symbols of communion when we perform it (that the bread doesn’t actually become the body), so too it is important to explain that church online is a temporary and imperfect substitute.

Online church is a *simulation* of church.

But when we, as the body of Christ, are forced into isolation, what can we do? The temptation with our technology is to turn to simulations of church. The fact that the transition to live-streaming services is so easy for many Evangelical churches demonstrates that we have already transformed our understanding of church into a simulation. Whenever we believe that church something we *watch*, we are already outside of the body. The body of Christ is something in which we must really participate, not simulate participation. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we

Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar?" (1 Cor 10:16–18). This is an interesting passage because in context, Paul is talking about food sacrificed to idols. Paul has an interesting sense of *real* participation. Eating a sacrifice is inclusion in the sacrifice. So, participation in communion is joining Jesus on the cross (see also Rom 6:8, 8:17, Gal 2:20, Col 2:20, 3:1–4). For Paul, this is not simply a simulation or what we might call a “merely symbolic.” Joining in the bread and cup is to be enfolded into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul is talking exactly about what philosopher Jean Baudrillard investigates as *simulacra*. That’s just a fancy Latin word for “image” but it implies an unreality. Baudrillard shows how we have entered into a time when much of participation in reality has now been replaced by a participation in simulation that comes by images or *simulacra*. Those who make symbols a simulation end up preparing the way for the disappearance of God. If God can be represented by empty signs, and we expose those signs as empty, it exposes an unreality to what they represent. What Paul and Baudrillard understand is that reality, in the human experience, is made up of symbols. We cannot have some reality that does not go through symbols. We cannot come to God apart from the human Jesus.

Online communion is a *simulation* of communion.

The first thing to point out about doing the sacraments online is that this is not a new thought. Mass and immediate communication has existed since the telegram. Telephones, radios, televisions have been part of our culture for generations. And yet, we have not seriously considered doing communion via radio or television. Why is live-streaming different? It is not different, apart from perhaps some higher level of interactivity. What

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But simulated communion is not communion, it's like "Skype kisses". We cannot join together when we are not together. We cannot be united in the body of Christ if we are not together in the body. If we are virtually present, we have a simulation of presence, rather than the real presence of God in the Holy Spirit. Now, of course the Holy Spirit is not bound to any place or time. Certainly God *can* use online worship in any way he chooses. But it is our responsibility to be mindful of how we represent God. It is right to be discontent with the absence.

Online communion also distances communion from its root understanding of sacrifice, which Paul alluded to in 1 Cor 16. Sacrifice in the ancient mind always required participation. A sacrifice was not effective if someone did not participate. In fact, in many ancient cultures, not joining in public festivals was criminalized because they believed that the whole community was present before their gods, not individuals. Paul has the same notion, which is why he has such stern commands about fencing the table. Paul sees that by one individual in the church practicing sexual immorality, the whole body of Christ was united to prostitution! (1 Cor. 6:15). The part and the whole could not be separated. For us to be content with simulated participation, with a simulated altar, shows how we live in a radically different world than Paul! If we are joining in the sacrifice of Christ, this requires a real presence.

We are setting precedents.

While it is tempting to take extraordinary measures in extraordinary times, we inevitably set precedents for future understandings of "normal." The more we normalize simulated church, the more satisfied people will be with simulations. We do not worship a simulated God, but an incarnate "IRL" God. The way we worship transforms who we think we are worshiping. Liturgy forms us. James K.A. Smith talks about "cultural

a simulated presence of the body of Christ, what does that reveal about our beliefs? This cultural liturgy perhaps reveals that we already see the body of Christ as something simulated, as “merely symbolic.”

Philosophers of technology have been sounding alarm bells for multiple generations now about an uncritical belief that technology is “merely a tool” that we can use however we want. Every tool we use transforms us as we use it to transform the world around us. “To a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” Marshall McLuhan famously said about modern mass communication, “The medium is the message.” That is, the way we transmit information itself becomes what we are transmitting. The fact of TV transformed society into a television society, as did the automobile, and other technologies. I can highly recommend Eric Jacobsen’s new book (an ECO pastor), *Three Pieces of Glass: Why We Feel Lonely in a World Mediated by Screens* (Brazos). It’s unfortunately not out until May 5th, [but here’s a link to a talk he gave about it](#). The internet’s ability to bring us into a simulated presence, more than TV, radio, or telegram, transforms us into simulations of people in simulated communities. The Christian thinker, Jacques Ellul, talked about how technology has become the environment in which we live and move and have our being. This has dramatic implications for how we engage with God, with one another, and with God’s creation. He sounded alarm bells about this in the 1950’s! Technology is not neutral, nor a gift from God. It is a human creation with deep ambiguities. It creates many unforeseen consequences that we rarely stop to consider before adopting it. It is a major part of ecological crises. The technological environment transforms God’s creation into human creations. We turn rich and complex diversity into monocrops, concrete, square city blocks. This transforms our beliefs about what reality is, who God is, how we connect with God, what is good for us, what-it-means-to-be-human. On top of that, we are not capable of being objective judges of the goodness of technology. We love the things we have, of course, and we have a hard time imagining life differently. But we cannot judge our world while we are fully integrated into it! That’s not how judges operate. They need to bring an outside perspective. But we can acknowledge without labelling

It is fitting to miss the body of Christ when unable to join together.

Scripture is full of examples of people who were forcibly separated from the presence of God and other believers:

- Paul longed for churches while he was imprisoned
- The Israelites lost the Ark of the Covenant when Saul misused it, thus losing the symbol of the presence of God.
- The Israelites lost the temple, and the presence of God in their midst when they went into Babylonian Exile.

In each of these situations the people lamented. They did not try to cope by simulating what was lost. They adapted, were creative, and were faithful. Daniel stands out as the classic example of faithfulness in exile.

Lament is the appropriate response to separation from the body of Christ.

This is not a season to attempt to replace the gathering of the body of Christ with simulations of it. It is a season to mourn, to lament, to miss the body of Christ. Now is a time of fasting, for weeping, for sackcloth and ashes. Traditionally in Scripture, fasting was a normal response of a people to disaster. In our culture of always needing everything now, of

gathering together, hard as that is to pastorally teach.

The Lord disciplines those he loves

The life of a Christian is a life of discipleship, of a growth to maturity *together* (Eph 4). We are called to be Christlike, and this takes discipline. God disciplines those he loves, as any good Father does (Deut 8:5, Ps. 94:12, Heb 12, Rev. 3:19). Now is a time to grow as the church in the experience of exile and wilderness. Old norms have vanished overnight. The regular routines are ruined. God meets his people in the wilderness to form them into a people worthy of bearing his name to the world. How might we use this cultural moment to grow in new ways and new directions?

There is a time for everything under the sun (Ecclesiastes 3)

Why not plan for a joyful communion service when your church is allowed to gather publicly again? There is a time to weep and a time to be joyful. There is a time for everything under the sun, and it is appropriate to do things differently now. We do not have to simulate normalcy when the normal is gone. The old norms may never return. But our God is not a God of the normal (that's what paganism is all about), but one who is bringing his disruptive kingdom of reconciliation and peace. Our job all along has been to reveal that kingdom to a lost and darkened world. Now is the time to practice this in radically new ways.

Sources/Further Reading

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In Christ,

Rev. Dr. G.P. Wagenfuhr

Theology Coordinator



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5638 Hollister Ave Suite #210
Goleta, CA 93117

(855) 326-3268
office@eco-pres.org

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