

Internet Communion?

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 resulted in unprecedented interruptions in the liturgical life of Lutheran congregations all around the world. Because the “social distancing” regulations and “stay at home” orders that were issued by the civil authorities generally applied also to Christian churches, regular public worship services in most places were temporarily suspended; and Christians in many places were, for a time, no longer able to receive the Lord’s Supper in the usual way, if at all. Lutheran pastors encouraged individual households to be diligent in cultivating their family devotional life during those difficult days. And Lutheran pastors themselves also made diligent use of the Internet for preaching and teaching. These were good and proper responses to the unusual circumstances in which Lutherans found themselves. Family devotions, and online sermons and Bible studies, did indeed help to meet many of the spiritual needs of God’s people, at a time when the ordinary public gatherings of the church could not be held.

But *some* of the proposals that were made at that time, for how the church and its members could continue to receive the blessings of the gospel in those difficult days, were *not* good and proper. Especially for Lutherans, the suggestion that pastors could remotely consecrate bread and wine for a sacramental use in their members’ homes, through an Internet connection or some similar electronic means, was not good and proper. And when pastors from various synods went ahead and presumed to celebrate “Holy Communion” in this way, this was not good and proper.

The Sacramental Action

The Internet provides the church of our time with new ways of bringing the Word of God to people at a distance. But some things simply cannot be done over the Internet. The Internet and other forms of remote electronic communication may indeed be used for church activities that are the equivalent of what Jesus did when he preached out in the open for the benefit of anyone who was there to listen. But the Internet and other forms of remote electronic communication may not be used for the equivalent of what Jesus did when he gathered in person with the closed circle of his disciples in the upper room, to give them – bodily, by his own hand – the sacrament of his body and blood.

At this first Lord’s Supper Jesus solemnly told his disciples – and through them he tells us – “Do this.” The orthodox church of all times and places has honored this command, and has done what Jesus did in its celebrations of the sacrament that he has left for us. But a pastor speaking the Words of Jesus into a microphone or a telephone handset in one place, while people in another place are eating bread and drinking wine, is not doing what Jesus did. The elements that someone in a distant location might place in front of his computer monitor or television set, or next to his radio or telephone, are

not in the physical presence of the pastor and under the pastor's control. And the pastor is not personally present with such communicants, to supervise their reception of the sacrament. In the original institution, Jesus said, "*this* is my body" – that is, *this* bread, which is under my control, and which I am offering to you to eat, is my body. Jesus did not say, "*that* is my body" – that bread which is distant from me and beyond my control, in another room, in another building, in another city.

The Formula of Concord teaches that "in the administration of the Holy Supper the Words of Institution are to be clearly and plainly spoken or sung *publicly in the congregation*" – that is, in the presence of those people who are gathered for the reception of the sacrament. The Formula goes on to explain that

This is done, first, so that Christ's command, "Do this," may be obeyed. Second, it is done so that Christ's words will arouse, strengthen, and confirm the hearers' faith in the nature and benefits of this sacrament... Third, it is done so that the elements of bread and wine are sanctified and consecrated in this holy practice, whereby Christ's body and blood are offered to us to eat and to drink, as Paul says [1 Cor. 10:16], "The cup of blessing that we bless..." (FC SD VII:79-82¹)

The Formula of Concord also confesses: "For wherever what Christ instituted is observed and *his words are spoken over the bread and cup* and wherever *the consecrated bread and cup are distributed*, Christ himself exercises his power through the spoken words, which are still his Word, by virtue of the power of the first institution" (FC SD VII:75²). The lack of physical and communal "connectedness" between pastor, elements, and communicants that is inherent in electronic communication makes this impossible. A pastor who is supposedly consecrating elements through the Internet or over the telephone is not speaking the Words of Christ "over" the bread and wine, because the bread and wine are miles away from where he is. And he is not carrying out or supervising the distribution of these elements to would-be communicants, as they are gathered around their televisions or radios.

Altar Fellowship and Pastoral Oversight

Advocates for digital consecrations and electronic communion services also needed to face up to the "open communion" monstrosity that would be set in motion by the practice of consecrating elements remotely if such a practice was actually valid. In all places in the world where an Internet connection is available, people unknown to an online "celebrant" could decide on their own to place bread and wine in front of their computer monitors while viewing his webcast, so that this online "celebrant" could become responsible for an untold number of unworthy receptions of the body and blood of Christ, by an untold number of people he has never met. The "gatekeeper" role of the presiding minister that the church catholic has always recognized, was recognized also by the Lutheran Reformers. The Augsburg Confession observes, with approval, that "Chrysostom says that the priest stands daily at the altar, inviting some to Communion and keeping others away" (AC XXIV:36 L). But how can an Internet "celebrant" keep people away from their own computers?

As the Augsburg Confession describes the reforms in sacramental practice that the Lutherans had instituted, it states that

The people have grown accustomed to receiving the sacrament together – all who are fit to do so. ... For people are admitted only if they first had an opportunity to be examined and heard. (AC XXIV:5-6 L)

In his Shorter Preface to the Large Catechism, Martin Luther also states that anyone who does not know the basic content of the catechism “should not be numbered among Christians nor admitted to any sacrament,” and that “those who come to the sacrament certainly should know more and have a deeper understanding of all Christian teaching than children and beginners in school” (LC SP: 2, 5). These are the classic standards of pastoral catechesis and sacramental oversight to which Confessional Lutheran ministers have always held themselves.

But how could any of this be enforced and implemented by a pastor, if his Internet consecrations are valid? How could he control who receives the sacrament, and how could he exercise any pastoral oversight with respect to the recipients, if it is in fact the case that his online consecrations are efficacious for any bread and wine that are in proximity to the monitor of any computer anywhere in the world, that happens to have its browser set to the webpage where his live feed can be viewed?

And would these Internet consecrations be valid and efficacious also when people watch archived recordings of his online communion services, or a DVD of a communion service? If not, why not? If someone places bread and wine in front of the speakers of his boombox while playing a Paul McCreech liturgical reconstruction CD, would the chanted Verba on that CD serve as a consecration for this bread and wine? If not, why not? Once people start going down the road of accepting, as valid, consecrations that are performed through digital media, and not in person, where will it end?

As a remedy to this problem, some suggested that a pastor’s speaking of the Words of Institution through electronic media would not be sacramentally effective when he did not intend it to be (such as with a public and unrestricted webcast of a communion service at his church), but that it *would* be sacramentally effective when he *did* intend it to be (such as with a private video conference or a telephone call that involves only one household). But the idea that priestly “intention” contributes to the validity of a sacrament is a Tridentine Catholic concept, and is not an orthodox Lutheran concept. Martin Chemnitz writes:

...when in the action or administration of the sacraments the institution itself is changed, mutilated, or corrupted, it is certain that then it is not a true sacrament. For it is the word of institution, coming to the element, which makes a sacrament. This opinion is simple, true, and certain, offering to consciences useful, firm, and necessary comfort which we shall not allow to be taken away from us, and it serves the glory of God that His truth should not be measured by the intention of a human minister, which can neither be known to us nor certain, and that faith

should not depend on the human minister but should rest on the truth and power of God, who instituted the sacrament and gave the promise.³

If electronic consecrations are real consecrations, then they are always real consecrations, regardless of what a pastor thinks or wants. And if electronic consecrations are not real consecrations, then they are never real consecrations, regardless of what a pastor thinks or wants. But as it is, electronic consecrations are not in accord with the institution of Christ. Therefore, objectively speaking, they are not real consecrations.

We are not denying the *inherent efficacy* of God's Word in general. But we are expressing grave doubts concerning the *sacramental effectiveness* of the Words of Institution in particular, when those Words are spoken in a setting and context that differ from what the Lord has prescribed for the celebration of his Holy Supper. As a general principle, Lutherans believe that if the Lord's sacramental institution is "changed, mutilated, or corrupted," then the presence of the Lord's body and blood – which depends on that institution – is made doubtful at best, and is nullified at worst.

The Word and Institution of Christ

We can consider another scenario, which does not involve the use of digital media, but which does illustrate the Lutheran teaching about what portions of bread and wine are actually being consecrated and set aside for a sacramental use, when the Words of Institution are spoken by a pastor within a valid service of Holy Communion. Let's say that someone under church discipline has been suspended from the Lord's Supper, so that he would be refused if he were to approach the altar during the distribution. He thinks that he can circumvent this discipline by bringing his own bread and wine to church and having it with him in the pew – with the idea that when the elements on the altar are consecrated, his bread and wine will also be consecrated, since he is sitting within earshot of the pastor's speaking of the Words of Institution. And he would then eat and drink the bread and wine he had brought. Would we grant that such a man had successfully tricked the pastor into communing him? Or would we rightly point out that since the Words of Institution were not "spoken over" the bread and wine that the man had with him in the pew, and since that bread and wine were not "distributed" to him by the pastor (or by a liturgical assistant under the pastor's direction), his bread and wine were *not* included in the consecration, and were *not* a part of the unified sacramental action on this occasion?

This whole question is similar to the Reformation-era question of whether a private mass celebrated without communicants – in which the priest alone communes – is actually the sacrament that Jesus instituted. Even though the priest in such a case would recite the Words of Christ over bread and wine, the Reformers still rejected the legitimacy of this practice. In the Smalcald Articles Luther states that if a priest "really desires to commune, he can do so most fittingly and properly in the sacrament administered according to Christ's institution." A priest who celebrates mass privately,

without communicants, “does not know what he is doing because he follows a false human opinion and imagination without the sanction of God’s Word” (SA II, II:84).

It is a departure from the institution of Christ to presume to hold a “communion service” without communicants being physically present, to receive what is supposed to be blessed, and offered to them, by the celebrant. This was the mistake of the Roman priests, with their private masses. It is also a departure from the institution of Christ to presume to hold a “communion service” without a celebrant being physically present, to bless, and offer to the communicants, what is supposed to be received by them. This is the mistake of those who advocate, or allow for, remote digital “consecrations.”

Lutherans confess in the Formula of Concord that in any proper celebration of the Lord’s Supper,

Christ’s command, “Do this,” must be observed *without division or confusion*. For it includes the entire action or administration of this sacrament: that *in a Christian assembly* bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord’s death is proclaimed, as St. Paul presents the entire action of the breaking of the bread or its distribution and reception in 1 Corinthians 10[:16]. (FC SD VII:84⁵)

An Internet “consecration” divides and confuses the institution of Christ. An Internet “communion service” that has its basis in such a consecration does not comport with the sacramental action commanded by Christ. With a practice that departs so far from what Jesus did, and from what Jesus tells us to do, there is no proper foundation of certainty on which the conscience of a communicant can rest, which would enable him to believe that such a “consecration” is really efficacious, and which would enable him to believe that the true body and blood of the Lord are really present in such a “communion service.”

We must conclude that anyone who presumes to consecrate far-distant portions of bread and wine in this way and for this purpose “does not know what he is doing because he follows a false human opinion and imagination without the sanction of God’s Word.” We would therefore counsel a misguided Christian who thinks it is possible to receive the sacrament according to such an arrangement, that if he “really desires to commune, he can do so most fittingly and properly in the sacrament administered according to Christ’s institution.” If it is not *possible* for a Christian to commune in an observance of the sacrament that is conducted according to Christ’s institution, then it is simply not possible for him to commune at all.

Fathers as Co-Consecrators?

During the coronavirus pandemic, some of the pastors who presided over services of Holy Communion through the Internet did seem to suspect that online consecrations might not really be valid all by themselves. And so these pastors introduced a nuanced variation in the way they practiced Internet communion, by

directing the head of the household to speak the Words of Institution over elements that had been placed in front of the computer monitor in the family home, while the pastor was speaking those Words on the screen. In this way, if the pastor's remote consecration was not truly efficacious in itself, then at least the bread and wine would be getting consecrated by the husband or father. This, however, introduced a whole new problem with respect to the orderly administration of the Sacrament of the Altar.

In its Biblically-based teaching about the public ministry of Word and Sacrament in the church, the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope explains that

The gospel bestows upon those who preside over the churches the commission to proclaim the gospel, forgive sins, and administer the sacraments. In addition, it bestows legal authority, that is, the charge to excommunicate those whose crimes are public knowledge and to absolve those who repent. It is universally acknowledged, even by our opponents, that this power is shared by divine right by all who preside in the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops. (Tr 60-61)

And in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, we read that "priests" or pastors are indeed "called to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments to the people" in the Lutheran Church, because "the church has the mandate to appoint ministers, which ought to please us greatly because we know that God approves this ministry and is present in it" (Ap XIII:9, 12).

The Large Catechism confesses that through the sacrament of Baptism "we are initially received into the Christian community" (LC IV:2). Even when it is administered in a private setting, Baptism always has the whole church in view, since the Holy Spirit, through this sacrament, unites the person being baptized to the "one body" of Christ: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13⁶). The Lord's Supper, too - in the words of the Smalcald Articles - is "the common sacrament of the church," which is not to be played with "apart from God's Word and outside the church community" (SA II, II:9). And this is why we confess in the Large Catechism that "the whole gospel and the article of the Creed, 'I believe in one holy Christian church...the forgiveness of sins,' are embodied in this sacrament and offered to us through the Word" (LC V:32⁷) - that is, through the instituting and consecrating Word of Christ. The Lord's Supper is therefore also a sacrament of and for the "one body" of Christ: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17).

For these reasons, according to God's regular order, the sacraments of God's church are to be administered by those "pastors, presbyters, or bishops" who have been trained and called to "care for God's church" (1 Timothy 3:5). St. Paul's statement to Titus that a presbyter or bishop in the church is "God's steward" (1:7) hearkens back to what he had previously said in his First Epistle to the Corinthians, concerning the "stewards of the mysteries of God" (4:1). The Apology explains what this means for

Lutherans, when it confesses that a “minister who consecrates gives the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as a minister who preaches sets forth the gospel to the people, as Paul says [1 Cor. 4:1], Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries [*sacramentorum Dei*],’ that is, of the gospel and the sacraments” (Ap XXIV:80-81). And the Apology states elsewhere that those who “hold office in the church...represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], ‘Whoever listens to you listens to me.’ When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ” (Ap VII/VIII:28).

In regard to the Sacrament of the Altar in particular – as it is administered according to the Lord’s institution by the church’s called ministers – the Formula of Concord quotes this statement from Luther’s treatise on “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests”:

“This command and institution of his have the power to accomplish this, that we do not distribute and receive simply bread and wine but his body and blood, as his words indicate: ‘This is my body, this is my blood.’ So it is not our work or speaking but the command and ordinance of Christ that make the bread the body and the wine the blood, beginning with the first Lord’s Supper and continuing to the end of the world, and it is administered daily *through our ministry or office.*” (FC SD VII:77⁸)

Elsewhere in the treatise from which the Formula of Concord quotes these words, Luther more precisely *defines* this “ministry or office” when he explains that the Lord’s Supper is “a common meal, which God ordained should be administered to Christians through the clerical office.”⁹ And Luther more fully *describes* this “ministry or office” when he writes in this treatise that

in our churches we can show a Christian a true Christian mass according to the ordinance and institution of Christ, as well as according to the true intention of Christ and the church. There our pastor, bishop, or minister in the pastoral office, rightly and honorably and publicly called, ...goes before the altar. Publicly and plainly he sings what Christ has ordained and instituted in the Lord’s Supper. He takes the bread and wine, gives thanks, distributes and gives them to the rest of us who are there and want to receive them, on the strength of the words of Christ: “This is my body, this is my blood. Do this,” etc.¹⁰

A part of what it means for the Lord’s Supper to be administered through this “ministry or office” is also touched on in the Large Catechism, where Luther speaks on behalf of all faithful Lutheran pastors in his declaration that “we do not intend to admit to the sacrament, and administer it to, those who do not know what they seek or why they come” (LC V:2¹¹). Officiating at the administration of this sacrament is an exercising of spiritual authority and the care of souls, wherein the officiant reserves the right to examine would-be communicants and to guide them in their preparation for receiving the body and blood of Christ – always remembering St. Paul’s sober warning

that whoever “eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:27).

And the standards of responsible sacramental oversight that apply in a public Divine Service are the same standards of responsible sacramental oversight that apply in private administrations of the sacrament. In commenting on the character and duties of “the priestly office which God has instituted,” Luther affirmed that “the Sacraments are to be distributed through a common public office in the stead of Christ and of Christendom”; and he added that “when one gives the Sacrament to the sick, this comes from the instituted office, just as if one took the Sacrament from the altar otherwise and brought it to someone in a corner or behind the church door; and so the office should remain unperverted here in its function.”¹²

Admitting communicants to the altar, or declining to admit them, is a very serious responsibility. It is a *pastoral* responsibility. John F. Brug writes:

It is clear that the Lord’s Supper should be administered by the pastor. It is not our practice to have a layman officiate at the Lord’s Supper. Even when congregations were quite isolated and some did not have a pastor present every Sunday, the Lord’s Supper was celebrated only when the pastor was present. Proper administration of the Lord’s Supper involves more than being able to read the right words. It involves pastoral responsibility for the souls of those who attend.¹³

Brug also explains that

the pastor is responsible for how the sacraments are administered. The administration of the Lord’s Supper involves spiritual judgment. Decisions commonly need to be made by the administrator about who is properly prepared to receive the Sacrament, both in public worship services and in the visitation of shut-ins. At times, there is a responsibility to exclude some from receiving the Sacrament. This requires a shepherd’s knowledge of the sheep, and it is definitely the work of spiritual oversight.¹⁴

The Lutheran Church does teach that in the case of an emergency, when a necessary public ministration of the means of grace cannot be carried out by a regular public minister, the normal arrangement is temporarily suspended, and “the order yields to the need.” A conscience’s need for the hope and comfort of the gospel is always paramount. Therefore, the ecclesiastical “order” of vocation, and (if need be) the “order” of creation,¹⁵ properly “yield” in a situation where an inflexible adherence to these divine orders would result in a harmful silencing and deprivation of that gospel. Johann Gerhard teaches:

Assuming that there is no regular minister of the Church, the administration of Baptism should still not be omitted, since for the essential parts of Baptism it is not at all required that he who administers this Sacrament should be a minister of the Church; therefore, in this case the order yields to the need.

According to Gerhard, this principle applies also to “absolution, which any layman may announce to a dying person from the Gospel, ...when no ordered minister of the Church can be obtained.” And Gerhard similarly concedes that “Laymen act properly when they instruct or comfort a congregation that is without a regular shepherd or sick people or those who in any way are afflicted, as in times of a siege, pestilence, persecution, etc.”¹⁶

In regard to the possibility of an emergency administration of *the Sacrament of the Altar*, however, C. F. W. Walther observes that,

Starting with Luther, the vast majority of our theologians maintain that the Holy Supper should never be administered privately by a person not holding the public preaching office or by a so-called layman – partly because, unlike with Baptism or Absolution, there cannot be an emergency regarding Holy Communion which would justify straying from God’s order (1 Cor. 4:1; Rom. 10:15; Heb. 5:4); partly because the Holy Supper “is a manifest confession and should thus have manifest ministers’; partly because divisions can easily be caused by such private [acts of] Communion.¹⁷

Some of the influential theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth century were, however, of the opinion that there could be circumstances for an “emergency” administration of the Lord’s Supper. Yet the examples they gave of when this might be done involved situations such as when Christians were cut off from the ministry of orthodox pastors for a prolonged period of time, or when a Christian was near death. They did not consider situations that involved only a temporary isolation, or a mere inconvenience in being able to receive the ministrations of a regularly-called pastor, to be legitimate emergencies.¹⁸

Still, even when something extraordinary is done, it is with the understanding that the administration of a sacrament is always a churchly act and always a pastoral act – involving the exercise of spiritual care and oversight with respect to the sacramental recipient to the extent that this is possible. And so, for example, when a layman administers Baptism to a person who is in mortal danger, this is not a “lay baptism” strictly speaking, but is a baptism administered by an “emergency pastor.” The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope accordingly states that “in an emergency even a layperson grants absolution and *becomes the minister or pastor of another*. So Augustine tells the story of two Christians in a boat, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen) and then the latter, having been baptized, absolved the former” (Tr 67¹⁹).

It is the duty of Christian parents to teach God’s Word to their children. This is not just as an emergency measure, when there is no ecclesiastical minister to do it, but is an ordinary part of their domestic vocation as fathers and mothers. Luther often and in many places affirmed this.²⁰ But in response to a query on whether the father of a family may, under certain circumstances, administer the Lord’s Supper to the members of his household, Luther spoke in a very different way. He pointed out that a house father “has neither call nor command to do so. ... It would also give great offense to administer

the Sacrament here and there in the homes, and in the end no good would come of it, for there will be factions and sects..." Luther went on to explain that

if a father wishes to teach the Word of God to his family, that is right and should be done, for it is God's mandate that we should teach and bring up our children and household; that is commanded to everyone. *But the Sacrament is a public confession and should have public ministers*, because, as Christ says, we should do it in remembrance of Him; that is, as St. Paul explains it, we should show forth or preach the Lord's death till He comes [cf. 1 Corinthians 11:26]. And here [Paul] also says that we should come together, and he severely rebukes those who, each in his own way, use the Lord's Supper individually. On the other hand, it is not forbidden but rather commanded that everyone individually should instruct his household in God's Word, as well as himself, though no one should baptize himself, etc. *For there is a great difference between a public office in the church and [the office of] a father in his household*. Hence the two must neither be mingled into each other nor be separated from each other. Since there is *neither an emergency nor a call* here, we must do nothing out of our own devotion without God's definite mandate, for no good will come from it.²¹

In his statement that a housefather "has neither call nor command" to commune himself and the members of his family, Luther is certainly thinking of what the Augsburg Confession declares "Concerning church order": that "no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called" (AC XIV L). A father or husband, as such, holds a domestic office, not an ecclesiastical office. Even if his family is cut off from the ordinary worship of the church for a limited time, this in itself is not the kind of emergency that would justify his becoming, or being appointed to be, an "emergency pastor" for his household. He should therefore not be authorized to consecrate the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, and thereby to become the presiding minister of this ecclesiastical sacrament in his domestic setting – whether or not his regular pastor is simultaneously speaking the Words of Institution over the Internet.

The Lord's Supper is a great comfort to Christians, since they are able to receive God's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation in a very personal and tangible way through this sacrament. But the Lord's Supper is not the *only* means, or even the *chief* means, through which these divine gifts can be received. Luther writes that

*the word of God is the greatest, most necessary, and most sublime part in Christendom (for the sacraments cannot exist without the word, but indeed the word can exist without the sacraments, and in an emergency one could be saved without the sacraments – as for example, those who die before receiving the desired baptism – but not without the word).*²²

On one occasion Luther's advice was sought by some Bohemian Hussites who had been deceiving the pope with a pretense that they were still Romanists, in order to obtain episcopal ordination for their pastors. They believed that receiving the Lord's

Supper was necessary for their faith and salvation, and they furthermore believed that such a subterfuge was necessary in order to receive the Lord's Supper. Luther admonished them not to do this anymore, and wrote that

if misfortune and need are so great that they can secure ministers in no other way [than by subterfuge], I would confidently advise that you have no ministers at all. For it would be safer and more wholesome for the father of the household to read the gospel and, since the universal custom and use allows it to the laity, to baptize those who are born in his home, and so to govern himself and his according to the doctrine of Christ, even if throughout life they did not dare or could not receive the Eucharist. For the Eucharist is not so necessary that salvation depends on it. The gospel and baptism are sufficient, since faith alone justifies and love alone lives rightly. ...

The father in the home...can provide his own with the necessities through the Word and in pious humility do without the nonessentials as long as he is in captivity. In this regard we follow the custom and law of the Jewish captives [in Babylon] who were not able to be in Jerusalem or to make offering there. Upheld in their faith alone by the Word of God they passed their lives among enemies while yearning for Jerusalem. So in this case the head of the household suffering under the tyranny of the pope would act most appropriately and safely if while longing for the Eucharist, which he neither would dare nor could receive, in the meantime zealously and faithfully propagated faith in his home through the Word of God until God on high in his mercy either brought the captivity to an end or sent a true minister of the Word.²³

Conclusion

Lutherans take something like the proper administration of the sacraments very seriously, in light of their principled conviction – with respect to the doctrines of the church and of church fellowship – that

The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and *the sacraments are administered rightly*. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. (AC VII:1-2 L²⁴)

As they are restrained by love for the church and its unity, Lutheran pastors and congregations are not free to press forward with controversial, disruptive, and ill-considered innovations, especially when these innovations involve something as fundamentally important as the sacrament of Holy Communion. They should instead, in whatever way they can, be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

Sadly, Christians in troubled and fearful times may occasionally be cut off, at least temporarily, from the Lord's Supper. And sometimes there is nothing that can be done about this. But even if that is the case, Christians in troubled and fearful times are

not cut off from Christ and from the comfort of the gospel, because they are not cut off from God's Word. Luther gives us this encouragement in the Longer Preface of his Large Catechism:

Nothing is so powerfully effective against the devil, the world, the flesh, and all evil thoughts as to occupy one's self with God's Word, to speak about it and meditate upon it, in the way that Psalm 1[:2] calls those blessed who "meditate on God's law day and night." Without doubt, you will offer up no more powerful incense or savor against the devil than to occupy yourself with God's commandments and words and to speak, sing, or think about them. (LC LP: 10)

When Christians who find themselves in difficult circumstances await better times, and when they await an opportunity to receive the blessed sacrament of their Savior's body and blood in an orderly way and with a clear conscience, they can pray and sing:

In Thee, Lord, have I put my trust;
Leave me not helpless in the dust;
Let me not be confounded.
Let in Thy Word my faith, O Lord,
Be always firmly grounded.

Bow down Thy gracious ear to me
And hear my cries and prayers to Thee;
Haste Thee for my protection,
For woes and fear surround me here.
Help me in mine affliction.²⁵

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July 7, 2020

¹Here and elsewhere, unless indicated otherwise, Confessional quotations are from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

²Emphases added.

³Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), p. 106; emphases added.

⁴*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959).

⁵Emphases added.

⁶Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version ®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

⁷Emphasis added.

⁸Emphasis added.

⁹Martin Luther, “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 38 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 152.

¹⁰Martin Luther, “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests,” p. 208.

¹¹Punctuation slightly revised.

¹²Martin Luther, Letter to George Spalatin, July 27, 1530 (WA Br. V, 504); quoted in Edward Frederick Peters, *The Origin and Meaning of the Axiom: “Nothing Has the Character of a Sacrament Outside of the Use,” in Sixteenth-Century and Seventeenth-Century Lutheran Theology* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1993), p. 184.

¹³John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), p. 221.

¹⁴John F. Brug, *The Ministry of the Word*, pp. 118.

¹⁵In his treatise “On the Councils and the Church” – after mentioning Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Word of God, and the Keys – Martin Luther states that “There must be bishops, pastors [*Pfarrher*], or preachers, who publicly and privately give, administer, and use the aforementioned four things or holy possessions in behalf of and in the name of the church, or rather by reason of their institution by Christ...” According to Luther, “The people as a whole cannot do these things, but must entrust or have them entrusted to one person,” and “he alone should be allowed to preach, to baptize, to absolve, and to administer the sacraments.” Luther then adds this Scriptural restriction: “It is, however, true that the Holy Spirit has excepted women, children, and incompetent people from this function, but chooses (except in emergencies) only competent males to fill this office, as one reads here and there in the epistles of St. Paul [I Tim. 3:2, Tit. 1:6] that a bishop must be pious, able to teach, and the husband of one wife – and in I Corinthians 14[:34] he says, ‘The women should keep silence in the churches.’ In summary, it must be a competent and chosen man. Children, women, and other persons are not qualified for this office, even though they are able to hear God’s Word, to receive Baptism, the Sacrament, absolution, and are also true, holy Christians, as St. Peter says [I Pet. 3:7]. ...Moses says in Genesis 3[:16], ‘You shall be subject to man.’ The Gospel...does not abrogate this natural law, but confirms it as the ordinance and creation of God” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 41 [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966], pp. 154-55).

¹⁶Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici, De baptismo*, 34, 36; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *The Church & the Office of the Ministry* (translated by John Theodore Mueller; edited by Matthew C. Harrison) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), p. 280.

¹⁷C. F. W. Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology* (translated by Christian C. Tiews) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), p. 206.

¹⁸See C. F. W. Walther, *American-Lutheran Pastoral Theology*, pp. 209-11.

¹⁹Emphasis added.

²⁰See, for example, Martin Luther, "Ten Sermons on the Catechism," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 137-38. See also LC V:85-87.

²¹Martin Luther, Letter to Wolfgang Brauer, 1536; Halle 10:2736-39; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *The Church & the Office of the Ministry*, pp. 163-64; emphases added by Walther.

²²Martin Luther, "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests," p. 189; emphasis added.

²³Martin Luther, "Concerning the Ministry," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), pp. 9-10.

²⁴Emphasis added.

²⁵Adam Reissner, "In Thee, Lord, Have I Put My Trust" [*In dich hab' ich gehoffet, Herr*] (translated by Catherine Winkworth), Hymn 524, *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Saint Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, Inc.), 1996.