Virtual Communion?

Theological consideration in these Corona times of social distancing.

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Many churches are providing Sunday morning worship via technology. Some are live streaming, others offering U Tube recordings, or zoom conferencing. Some are emailing bulletins that can be printed out and followed individually at any time during the week.

Such offerings are good and worthy to be used in these extraordinary times and in this Lenten season. We are all aware, however, that Easter is coming. Pastors are asking, "What about communion?" Can the Sacrament be celebrated virtually? Is it appropriate to have a clergy person representing the feast, saying the words, breaking the bread, pouring the wine, and consuming on behalf of the faithful watching on their screens? How would clergy advise the congregation to participate? Would a home slice of bread and a shot glass of wine be able to be blessed, consecrated, and relegated as holy?

What insights from our Reformed, Heidelberg, Mercersburg heritage might we glean to help us minister faithfully?

Below are thoughts and quotes that may help us be in conversation about this subject. Whether you decide to "cyber celebrate" or "not cyber celebrate," I hope you come to that conclusion based on sound theological reflection on the Sacrament and its meaning. I also hope you will be able to articulate the meaning of the Sacrament to the people in your parish.

COMPARING TRADITIONS

Thoughts of medieval catholic priests celebrating low mass alone in side altars are anathema to our Protestant sensibilities. The present Pope, I understand, will commune on behalf of the people. This is not a practice that would meet with our Reformed understanding of the feast of the people of God.

Casper Schwenkfeld 's view of spiritual communion (without elements) was refuted by most all of the Reformation leaders. Rev. Dr. Martha Kriebel gives a worthy apologetic for Schwenkfeld's theology. Schwenkfelders might refer to it.

The Question of the Real Presence and Local Presence is certainly central to the debate

If the Real Presence is a corporate, physical presence (transubstantiation, consubstantiation) the idea of virtual reception must be refuted. (as has been recently but Lutherans and Roman Catholics)

If Zwinglian, Anabaptist, or of those traditions that interpret the sacrament as a human ordinance or merely symbolically, the idea can be adapted easily. It's then just a memorial meal. Jesus can be remembered by anybody in any place.

Our German Reformed/ Bucerian/ Melanchthon/Heidelberg/ Calvin doctrine of the Real Spiritual Presence makes the question more intriguing.

Even the first German Reformed pastors in America engaged in a similar debate. Early settlers craved the Sacrament, finally drafting school teacher John Philip Boehm to celebrate in 1725. He had with him

the Palatinate liturgy and no doubt followed it literally. That was not good enough for George Michael Weiss, who criticized Boehm for enacting the liturgy without the benefit of being ordained.

Mercersburg 's Mystical Presence theology, directly and purposely consistent with early church Fathers, Heidelberg and the Calvinistic sacramental family gives much fodder to the subject.

Issues to be considered:

IS THE SACRAMENT OBJECTIVE OR SUBJECTIVE?

It is an objective, not merely subjective reality. This human ritual, when performed in good faith, is taken over by God. In it God makes a real substantial change. It is not just about what we people feel, remember, or think.

Believer's union with Christ rests on the supposition of an actual passing over of the power of his life into their persons; It needs … not merely a subjective but an objective base; the nourishment of a real communication progressively kept up with him whose "flesh is meat indeed' and whose 'blood is drink indeed" unto everlasting life. (John Nevin)

SYMBOL, SIGN, OR SEAL?

The bread and wine are not mere symbols but Visible signs and seals of invisible grace.

They also are not mere signs, but seal (promise, guarantee) the truths they signify. The gifts of God come with them in another sphere by the Spirit.

In the Sacrament is a holy and extraordinary grace. It is an actual dynamic presence by the mystic action of the Holy Ghost- a very reality indicated by the outward signs. (John Calvin)

HOW IS THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST MADE KNOWN?

We participate in his body and blood by the operation of the Holy Spirit as we receive by the mouths of our bodies these holy signs. (Heidelberg Catechism)

As sure as I receive from the hands of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and wine, so sure am I that Christ feeds and nourishes my soul to eternal life. (Heidelberg 75)

In the Lord's Supper the mystery of this communication is not only represented but sealed and certified as a present fact (Nevin)

The Presence is in the communing, in the breaking of the bread, in the giving, sharing, and eating.

The outward transaction certifies or makes sure divinely the inward result of the Spirit.

As certainly as the outward part of the liturgy continues in the sphere of sense- the mystery of participating in his life goes on at the same time in the Sphere of the Spirit. (Nevin)

ELEMENTS

Christ enters not by the elements themselves but by the transaction, in the breaking and sharing of the bread, in communion with others. Therefore, there is no such thing as private communion.

We participate not only orally and outwardly, but mystically, dynamically, and substantially.

However, there is a message in the elements and they should be regarded with utmost respect for what they represent. Bread and Wine are preferred.

CAN THERE BE A LIMIT TO THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT?

The Presence is in a spiritual oneness with Christ and with others.

While faith is required as the necessary condition of our union with Christ it is not allowed to be the cause. The main force of the Sacrament is found in the objective action of the Holy Spirit. (Nevin)

A true Spiritual Presence is stronger than a mere physical presence. (Think human connections)

The local barrier (time and place) is surmounted by the Holy Ghost, as an Ascension mystery.

In this Reformed tradition the prayer asking the Holy Spirit to come and to make a change in what the elements represent and also in us is a critical part of the liturgy. (Epiclesis)

If there is no barrier to the Spirit, how can we deny a long-distance Epiclesis?

CAN THE EFFICACY OF THE SACRAMENT BE COMPROMISED BY MISUSE, ABUSE, OR LACK OF FAITH?

Those who partake outwardly with true faith partake not only of the sign but of Christ- the thing it signifies. (Helvetic Confession)

However, we have more in communion than the mere exercise of our faith. It carries in itself an objective mystical force by the Holy Spirit by which we are made to participate in the true mediatorial life of the blessed redeemer. (Nevin)

When Jesus says I am the bread of life- he teaches we are saved not just by belief but by true communication with Christ's life as it passes over to us and becomes ours as truly as bread nourishes the body (Calvin)

Yet, those who receive without faith receive bread and wine only. (Bucer) (This addresses the pastor's question of who may or may not receive).

NOT SURE WHAT IS RIGHT AND BEST?

Would it cheapen the Sacrament? It is the pastor's duty to teach so this does not happen.

Give parishioners another reason to just stay home? It should be used only in rare situations.

What about taped, U Tube services that are not synched in real time? This is less than ideal, to say the least, because it dampens the sense of communal union.

My philosophy is: When not sure about who should be included in a Sacrament. Err on the side of Grace.

A FINAL WORD

The Eucharist is not just one of the many means of God's Grace. We do not just "Come…to seek a presence and to pray for a spirit" (UCC Brief Order of Word and Sacrament). We come to seek **Christ's**

Presence and to pray **for the Holy Spirit**. This means of Grace is Unique. We believe, by the action of God's Holy Spirit, we are raised up to commune, to be fed by the human Jesus our Christ. This is an Incarnational mystery. We believe the Easter message: Jesus lives, Jesus reigns. We do not eat a dead body. We are no less privileged to be one with our Lord and Savior Jesus than those disciples were in the Upper Room or at the shore on Easter morning. This is the good news we have to preach.

Bless you, stay safe, and have Peace