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Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 250 + October 2020
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“VIRTUAL COMMUNION” DURING A PANDEMIC? Five Questions to Consider

- 1 Every pastor has had the experience of bringing the Bread and Cup of Holy Communion to the sick and shut-in of their parishes.
- 2 And I applaud the recent options (since at least the publication of Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW, 1978) that provides that “Communion ministers may be sent to take the sacrament to those who are absent...”
- 3 (Aside: I assume you are aware that the English term “Mass” is thought by many to derive from the old Latin “Ita. Missa est”. This is roughly translated as a vocative and a passive: “Go. It is sent out.” What is sent out, you ask? Presumably the sacrament, to those who are absent.)
- 4 But in this time of pandemic, there has appeared on the scene still another possibility, this option made possible by new technologies such as FaceBook, or Messenger Room or Zoom or YouTube. The Sunday Service of Holy Communion is transmitted live or even delayed, using the technologies just mentioned, or others. And worshipers tuning in at home have been previously prompted to prepare a portion of bread and wine at the side of their laptops, and at the appropriate moments during the broadcast, consume them.
- 5 It’s a “virtual communion”. Or in language preferred by some proponents, “mediated communion”.
- 6 (Another aside: Karl Barth speaks of God’s presence among us as always a “mediated immediacy”. A “real presence”, but always “mediated”: By the words of scripture. By Bread and Cup of Communion and Water of Baptism. By the personality of the preacher. By the temperaments and gifts of the surrounding Christian community.)
- 7 Now, you’re asking – I at least am asking – Is this development legitimate? In a world wide pandemic such as ours at this moment in our history, are there compelling reasons to go down this road? To take up “virtual communion” that our new technologies seem to allow?

8 The following paragraphs represent one person's struggle with this issue. I pose the following as questions, rather than as statements, because I believe our present situation is truly unprecedented, and there might well be diverse and yet legitimate answers. I've conferred with respected and well-informed friends and mentors in what follows, although I take full responsibility for my own words.

9 For what it is worth, I myself am inclined to answer, at this moment, each of my questions below in the affirmative.

10 Question ONE: Is there a better alternative? Is "virtual communion" a desperate and unnecessary last resort? My answer: Yes. There must be better alternatives.

11 Even in our present pandemic, can't a way be found that somehow includes representatives of the Body, in person? As in 1 and 2 above, our best models. Perhaps offering the Bread only?

12 My understanding of contemporary Biblical scholarship insists that the term "Body of Christ" refers primarily – exclusively? – to the body of believers, the gathered assembly.

13 When St. Paul, for example, scolds his congregation at Corinth for "...eating and drinking unworthily..." and "...not discerning the body..." (1 Corinthians 11:17-34) he is not referring to doctrinal niceties about Bread and Cup. He is rather speaking of the gathered community, the Body of Christ. Which brings me to

14 Question TWO: Should we therefore be careful to "discern the Body" at such a moment in our history? The body of believers. That is where we meet the Real Presence. Not simply in the Bread and Cup.

15 The pandemic, I realize, does not in many cases permit in-person visits to the homes or bedsides of friends or community members, at least until late stage re-openings.

16 But that in-person, face to face meeting is of such crucial importance, to our ecclesiology, I will argue, that if the type of at home, in person, face to face meeting, with at least a representative of the Body – such as we find in 1 and 2 above – is not possible, then we are better off fasting from the Bread and Cup for the duration. And contenting ourselves with a "virtual Service of the Word."

17 And to keep things in an historic perspective, only a generation ago, most Lutheran and Anglican churches world wide celebrated Holy Communion only once every month. And two generations ago, in my childhood, my own Lutheran congregation celebrated Communion four times a year! And my father was the pastor! I'm happy to report that he changed and evolved over the years!

18 Further, many Protestant congregations still to this day observe the sacrament only four times a year! I am not recommending that practice, Lord knows. But those are the historic realities!

19 Question THREE: Are we promoting a magical view of Communion, by turning it “virtual”? My answer: Yes. That is a palpable danger.

20 To remain house-bound in your own living space, and to tune in a televised Service of Holy Communion on your electronic device while the electronic image of your pastor pronounces the words of the Great Thanksgiving at the Table, while you consume in solitude your pre-prepared portion of Bread and Wine – that strikes me as pretty close to witchcraft. I would not want to go down that road.

21 Question FOUR: By turning to “virtual communion”, are we re-enforcing a hierarchical view of Ordination? That’s another of my fears. It’s the virtual person up front in the funny clothes on my screen who says the magic words that constitute a valid sacrament. Bad news.

22 That corruption is at least mitigated when you’re there in person, and the delegated / called Presider is surrounded by a congregation of worshipers and flanked by a cohort of worship assistants, all of them lay people: Assisting Minister, Acolyte, Choir, Communion Ministers, Ushers.

23 Question FIVE: My last misgiving is part of a lonely crusade I have been waging for more than fifty years. There is a significant moral Issue at stake in any discussion of the Virtual versus the Real. Is ANY High Tech “virtual” experience simply an extension of our present realities? Or is there something fraudulent in the “virtual”? I’ll argue there’s a significant difference between the Virtual – the Fake, the Fraudulent – over against the Real.

24 I’ll close with a favourite story I have told before in these postings.

25 A mother is wheeling her pink cheeked baby in a stroller through Waterloo Park. A passing stranger stops for a moment to exclaim “What a lovely baby!”

26 The mother replies, “This is nothing. You should see his picture!”

27 Can you imagine anything more ridiculous? Preferring a photo to The Real Thing? Yet that happens over and over again, in our slavish fascination with our High Tech screens.

28 Who will deliver us from this obsession? High Tech has its place, to be sure. I myself depend on a set of hideously expensive High Tech hearing aids simply to negotiate everyday life.

29 But it’s not the same as it was when I could hear you with my own unaided ears.

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