

Virtual Lord's Supper?

Now that lots of churches have started to meet on-line, I've had a few people ask me about the sacraments. (So far, it's all been about the Lord's Supper, no one has asked about baptism yet — maybe that is to come).

Not surprisingly, this is not an issue that the Bible addresses! So, we need to step back and think about the principles involved. What follows are my thoughts about why and how we can approach the question from biblical principles, guided by WCF chapter 29.

The Lord's Supper is a good gift from God, established by Christ for the spiritual nourishment of God's people. Through it, Christ offers himself to us, just as he does in his Word. The Word, read and proclaimed is the foundational means of grace. The Lord's Supper focuses the promises of the Word for us and presents them in particular and physical signs. It explains the signs of the Supper and declares the promises which they seal.

The biblical pattern, in both testaments, is that the Word is a consistent element of worship (Dt 29:14-15; Neh 8:1-8; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 14:26; Col 3:15-16, Eph 5:19-20; 1 Tim 4:13). Because the church is formed and sustained by God's word, it is indispensable to the life of God's people. A church has not really met for worship if the Word has not been read and proclaimed in some form.

When we turn the Lord's Supper, it is a different situation. John Calvin protested the medieval practice of only having communion at Easter and argued that "Lord's Table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians, and the promises declared in it should feed us spiritually".¹ This seems to go beyond the New Testament directions, which simply speaks of what the Supper means "whenever" it is shared by the church (1 Cor 11:25-26). Reformed churches have generally considered that the Supper should be celebrated regularly but that it need not be weekly.²

The first thing to note, then, is that the church cannot live without the Word but can live without the Lord's Supper for a time. If you find it difficult or inappropriate to organise a virtual Lord's Supper, then you are not robbing the church of its necessary nutrition.

I do think, though, that we can share the Lord's Supper on-line (as it were). This would be an emergency measure, as is virtual worship. In the current circumstances, it is worth considering.³

The sacraments do not depend on the form of administration for their spiritual blessing, and there is nothing in the fact that a minister physically handles the bread and shares it that contributes to the benefit of the Supper. I have been at Lord's Supper celebrations with people sitting around tables and serving one other the bread and juice as the minister led the service. Whether you prefer that style or not, it seemed to me to a perfectly valid form of the Lord's Supper.

The Westminster Confession says that those who receive the Supper with true faith "spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all the benefits of his death" (29:7). This benefit depends on the work of the Spirit who gives faith. From the human side there are three elements which should be present: the signs of bread and wine shared, the fellowship of the church under the leadership of its elders, and the Word of God, especially the words of

¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. J.T. McNeill, ed., F. L. Battles, trans. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), IV, xvii, 46, 1424

² See helpful article by Ken Stewart, "The Frequency of Communion Calmly Considered" (April 18, 2012) <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-frequency-of-communion-calmly-considered/>

³ There are some cases in the Old Testament which show the flexibility available even under the ceremonial law. There are provisions for someone who is ritually unclean to celebrate the Passover a month later (Num. 9:9-12). 2 Chronicles 30 records an unusual Passover, led by King Hezekiah, which was postponed and then extended.

institution. If we are going to have the Lord's Supper "virtually", we should try to ensure that these elements are present.

Here is my suggestion for sharing the Lord's Supper over the next few months.

The first step will be to let people in your church know that you plan to share in the Lord's Supper on a particular Sunday. It is important that it is shared by God's people should be gathered together (though, needs be virtually). I would not encourage people to share in the Lord's Supper 'asynchronously'. That is, I would not offer a recorded version which members can use and watch any time they choose — that would remove the fellowship aspect of the meal.

In preparation, ask church members to have some simple bread and some grape juice or wine. If it is difficult to access grape juice or wine, some other juice or even water can substitute. The point is to maintain the biblical symbolism as closely as possible so people grasp the meaning of the meal. Paul condemned the rich Corinthians for indulging themselves at what they thought was the Lord's Supper while the poor went without (1 Cor 11:17-21). Encourage people to have simple elements to avoid this kind of pattern.

The Lord's Supper is meant to be a fellowship meal (1 Cor 10:17). If it is at all possible this should be done in a way in which people are aware of each other's presence and not simply looking at the leader. A "Zoom" arrangement, rather than a "Facebook" live feed is better. If you have a large congregation, you could arrange for a series of smaller on-line gatherings to help people have a stronger sense of communion with each other.

As with a normal Lord's Supper service, the minister (or home missionary) should lead. They would read the Scriptures and lead in prayer; or might ask other people to do them; then they will lead people through sharing the bread and the wine, inviting someone in each location to break and share the bread and the wine. (Remind people, even in homes, to be careful with hygiene).

I would not encourage families to share the Lord's Supper in their own capacity. In the New Testament, the Supper is a church ordinance, not a family ordinance (unlike the Passover).

If you are 'broadcasting' a service and people you do not know are watching on, then you have an extra responsibility to "fence" the table. The Bible warns about the danger of eating and drinking from the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner (1 Cor 11:27). If you are leading the Lord's Supper virtually, you should make it clear that the Lord's Table is for those that have faith in Christ and are living for him in fellowship with his people.

It will take a while for us to get used to these new arrangements and I'm sure churches will find variations on the above which work better in their context. Whenever we share in the Lord's Supper we anticipate the Day when we will share in the great wedding feast of the Lamb. Over the next few months, we will feel that even more intensely and will look forward to the day when we can eat together with our brothers and sisters.

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