

Communion Practices during a Pandemic: An Old Man's Reflections

In two weeks or so I turn 70, so I finally can legitimately behave like an old man and give people free advice. Let's start with two facts. First, *that* we celebrate Holy Communion is a command of Christ; *how* we celebrate it is an *adiaphoron*. Second, our presiding bishop—along with a host of Lutheran liturgy professors—have requested that we fast from the Lord's Supper. Because of this request, at least a portion of my talk must be about authority in the church. Finally, I will make some practical reflections about our practice.

Adiaphora

We begin with adiaphora. Now, it has been my experience that if there was one place Lutheran pastors-in-training universally fell asleep in “Lutheran Confessions,” it was when their teachers defined “adiaphora” for them, because most people think that “adiaphora” is a Greek term for things that don't matter. Part of the problem goes back to the editors of the *Book of Concord*, Kolb and Wengert, who mistakenly translated the Latin equivalent, *indifferentia*, as “indifferent matters.” Only a few years after publication did it finally dawn on me that our word “indifferent” does not mean what the Latin did, despite sounding like the same word. The preposition “in” in Latin means “not,” so that a proper translation (which we put into later printings) is “undifferentiated matters,” that is, these are not things that don't matter but things where we can't necessarily tell whether something is right or wrong, good or evil. This is why, both in the Augsburg Confession and in the Formula of Concord, the reformers quoted Irenaeus (via Eusebius the historian), “Diversity in fasting does not dissolve unity in faith.”

This is great advice for our present situation. I cannot by some academic fiat forbid some of you from practicing virtual communion, although I think it is a really bad practice. But as

soon as I say in no uncertain terms, “This is evil; this is wrong,” then I am wrong. But the reverse applies as well. Those of you who may be doing this should under no circumstances criticize your bishop or the presiding bishop or even a retired professor for arguing against what you are doing. The point, rather, is to force us all to think long and hard about what may be the *best* practice during these difficult times.

So our question cannot be about midnight in the garden of good and evil, to coin a phrase, but only about good, better, and best or bad, worse, and worst. Pastor Franklin Drews Fry, whose father was once the president of the LCA in the 1960s, was a font of theological bon mots. When asked about the rules for Lutheran ethics, he always replied, “Lutherans give it their reverent, best guess.” It is reverent, because we search Scripture, history, and theology and depend on these things to guide us; it is best, because use our mind and logic and common sense; but it is always a guess, that is, it is always open to criticism by ourselves and others. That’s my job today. To force all of us to reflect on our own current practices and to ask what is best, not just for ourselves and our small group of believers but also for our fellow Lutheran congregations, for our synod, and for our church.

Authority in the Church

Never in my seventy years have I seen worse behavior and a greater disrespect for authority than right now. In some ways, we are suffering from a post-modern hangover, where the catchphrase would appear to be not (as in my youth), “Do not trust anyone over thirty,” but rather, “Do not trust anyone whose reflection you do not see in the mirror when you wash your face in the morning.” Ours is a quintessentially solipsistic society—on both the left and the right of the political spectrum. For the church this is disastrous. For Lutherans, part of this is of our own making, where especially strains of American Lutheran pietism insisted that the only

authority rested with the individual or the congregation, which as a historian I can categorically say is the most un-Lutheran church polity in the world. We are not southern Baptists! Our church's founding confession, insists on the importance of following bishops. As soon as the reformers got a chance, they appointed bishops to the traditional sees—not just in Scandinavia but right in the duchies of Saxony and Württemberg. And already in the Augsburg Confession, article XXVIII they praised bishops. When the political situation in the Holy Roman Empire made it impossible to call those with oversight “bishops,” they stole a page out of Augustine's playbook, where he once mentioned that the proper translation of the Greek *episkopoi* would be *superintendentes*, superintendents, which some Lutheran churches still have today. And, like the ancient church, these superintendents had limited territories. There were even archbishops called general superintendents, one of the first of which was Johannes Bugenhagen, Wittenberg's pastor. And these people had authority to correct bad theology among their pastors. Our tendencies in America to dismiss what bishops or even other pastors say about something is simply a reflection of the evils of our society and not at all a reflection of our Reformation roots. So, my advice to you pastors is simply this: don't disrespect your bishops but show them the proper honor as an application of the fourth commandment to church life—just as Martin Luther suggests in the Large Catechism.

I was ordained in 1977 as a pastor of the American Lutheran Church. I, too, often suffered from a lack of respect for our leaders, until slowly but surely I learned better as a professor at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. When the ELCA was formed, one of the things that the LCA bishops insisted upon was that we are a single church in three expressions: congregational, synodical, and church-wide. At the time, I was skeptical. Since then, I have learned that this interdependence is one of the bulwarks against bad theology and

practice. But it is also consonant with early American Lutheran polity. In 1748, when Henry Melchior Muhlenberg helped to form the Pennsylvania Ministerium, the oldest part of the ELCA, they had an early crisis where congregational malcontents threw out its trustees (who had guaranteed the building loan for the church) and took over a congregation in Germantown, PA. Only because the rebels then hired a terrible pastor, did those true to the original trustees finally triumph and get their church back. In the meantime, Muhlenberg went to every other congregation in the Ministerium—including my wife’s congregation, which was founded in 1760—and insisted that they put in their constitutions a clause that the church property would revert to the Ministerium if they ever left. The point was simple: we’re in this together. Just as Philip Melanchthon wrote the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope against placing all authority in a tyrant in Rome, so today we face the same threat from congregational popes, whether in the form of tyrannical pastors or church councils, who think that they answer to no one.

Some Practical Reflections

If we can agree that the question of communion practice is about undifferentiated matters and that none of us is an ecclesiastical authority unto ourselves, then we can prayerfully consider what to do in the face of a pandemic.

1. The first piece of advice is from the Hippocratic oath: “Do no harm.” I do realize there are some people who imagine that any restriction on our behavior destroys our American independence (which they understand as license) or even our Christian freedom. This is foolish. Jesus did not say that the greatest commandment was “Suit yourself” or “Do what you like,” but “Love God” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Now Paul, who realized that loving God is

fulfilled by faith alone, said in both Romans and Galatians that for those justified by faith alone the chief commandment becomes, “Love your neighbor.” Here whatever we do must not violate the advice and counsel of public health officials. The anti-intellectualism of the American public with its anti-scientific bent must not become an excuse for us to harm our neighbor.

2. Every pastor is in fact a theologian in his or her parish. When we give it our reverent best guess, we really are the ones who know Scripture and tradition. Someone who has watched some fake evangelist defy the government, for example, is no match for the authority we must exercise. As I have written, however, the pastor’s authority is always transparent. When I say, as I hope you all do, “As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ and by his authority,” this is the very opposite of putting on airs. Indeed, refusing to name one’s actual authority in forgiving sin or giving advice is a false humility of the worst kind. I forgive by Christ’s authority, not my own. In fact, if it were up to me, there are people in the parish whom I would never want to forgive. But, again, having the authority of a theologian also means doing one’s homework—studying the Scripture and the Confessions—and listening to and respecting the authority of other theologians, pastors, teachers, and bishops.
3. To be the pastor and theologian in a parish means to die daily. The opponents will not only be cranky alligators in the congregation, that Kenneth Houck talks about, but also the devil. The devil would like nothing more than to destroy the comfort that Christ’s real presence in the Lord’s Supper gives.

4. Our practice then must reflect our confession of the real presence of Christ. The Lord's Supper is not a quaint snack; it is not simply a communal potluck; it certainly is not some magic that we pastors perform; it is not simply a sign of an absent Jesus or just a sign of Christian community. The Lord's Supper is a twofold promise: "Here I am" and "for you." The first means that when Christ holds a party, Christ shows up: "This *is* my body." The second means that this meal is not mere ritual but the actual distribution of Christ's body and blood *for the forgiveness of sins*. Actually, as Luther puts in his *Small Catechism*, it is three gifts for us: "forgiveness, life, and salvation, for where there is forgiveness there is also life and salvation." How does our practice reflect these twin truths?
5. Now the "for you" in the original Greek, Latin, German and Old English is plural! It is, to translate into Southern: "given for y'all." This is one reason that we must realize that "virtual" communion is not communion at all. As an older woman in the congregation I am serving as vice-pastor told me recently: "It was nice to see my grandchildren on ZOOM; but it's not the same as a hug." The hug that Jesus gives in the Supper includes the entire community. It's real.
6. My colleague and dear friend, Gordon Lathrop, always reminded his students that the Supper consisted of the staff of life and a festal drink. For us that means bread and wine. The disgusting notion of people sitting at home drinking Scotch and chips is the worst thing I can imagine. For one thing, it ruins a good single-malt Scotch; for another, it destroys Jesus' intent and turns this Holy Communion into a farce.

7. I think that virtual communion also has the potential of undermining the pastor's true calling. Either one becomes a magician, or one becomes completely unnecessary. Neither could be worse for the pastoral office.
8. Instead, the pandemic is precisely the time to rethink how we celebrate this meal: not to foster a self-centered religious experience, what Paul in Colossians 2:23 calls "self-chosen spirituality" (a verse often quoted by the reformers in this context) but to gather the assembly around God's Word—aural and visible. Remember, the proclamation and preaching of God's Word are also sacramental: we hear not the pastor's voice but the soft and tender call of our savior! And the sacraments are visible words. Just as we cannot have a virtual baptism, we need to avoid anything that divorces the means of grace from the community that the Holy Spirit forms through those means.
9. We must not let the allure of novel electronics blind us to our neighbors who do not or cannot participate. In my little congregation, there are old folks who do not have or can no longer operate computers. In other areas, such as where my son lives in Philadelphia, people are too poor. Whatever we do, we must, again quoting Gordon Lathrop, have worship with a strong center, Christ, and permeable boundaries, which welcome all especially the weak.
10. Not only do our neighbors include such people but they also includes other Christians. We have important ecumenical agreements in the ELCA with churches where our example of celebrating the Real Presence is crucial for their continued journey toward acknowledging that truth. For us to denigrate the Supper would be a terrible shame for the unity we share in Christ. And think of

how close we are on the question of the Real Presence with our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. Every time we turn the Supper into a snack or potluck, we are offending them. Why would we want them to stumble? When in the 1540s a group of Reformation-minded Venetians reached out to Martin Luther, just remember how he responded. On the question of the Real Presence, he told them that he had no trouble accepting them as brothers and sisters even if they continued to hold to the doctrine of transubstantiation. We also do well to remember that early in the pandemic Roman Catholics were urged to practice spiritual communion, which is also something that early Lutherans did not reject but embraced.

11. In New Jersey, we have slowly begun to gather folks for in-person worship. My wife has a great outdoor worship area on the church grounds next to a state park; my little congregation where I am vice-pastor will have its first indoor worship later this month. We are assiduously following public health guidelines. We still provide live streaming, and both congregations are excited by the possibility of continuing this ministry into the future for shut-ins and other at risk people—such as old, retired seminary professors.

So, these are some of my reflections. I would hope that they would stimulate our conversation in the time remaining. I want to close with a voice from my past, so to speak. Henry Eyster Jacobs was a teacher at the Philadelphia seminary, and his career spanned from the Civil War into the twentieth century. Like me, he was editor of the standard translation of *The Book of Concord* of his day. He wrote a hymn on the Lord's Supper that was in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. His words there provide a fitting close to my remarks. "Lord Jesus Christ, we

humbly pray That we may feast on thee today; Beneath these forms of bread and wine Enrich us with thy grace divine. One bread, one cup, one body, we, United by our life in thee, Thy love proclaim till thou shalt come To bring thy scattered loved ones home.” Amen. Thank you for your attention.

A Very Brief Bibliography

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