
Virtual Communion: Assembly, Digital Space, and Eucharistic Celebration

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, various practices have emerged surrounding digital, virtual, or electronic means of sharing the Eucharist. From the beginning of the pandemic lockdown (March 2020), some churches put a moratorium on such practices all together. Some churches embraced such practices fully and have integrated those practices into their ongoing worship life now. And still other churches fell somewhere in the middle, allowing means of virtual eucharistic sharing without having it as their primary worship offering. Now that the COVID-19 pandemic is beginning to wane, we might ask ourselves, what (if any) of these practices will continue, and what were emergency practices that we could let go of in the future? Furthermore, we must ask ourselves who decides? Might this be a denominational decision, congregationally based, or somewhere in between? In order to think more deeply about this issue, I propose we need to look at a few things. First, we need to think about the nature of the assembly itself. What is the Christian assembly, what properly constitutes such an assembly, and can such an assembly be held virtually? Second, we should look at practices that exist around sharing of the Eucharist through virtual means. For this, I will focus on work by Teresa Berger and Deanna Thompson, who both discuss various practices related to digital sharing of Holy Communion. Third, I will look at the document of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America titled *The Use of the Means of Grace* and see what that document proposes about the assembly and Holy Communion. Finally, I will attempt to pull these various threads together and propose a way for our increasingly digital society to think well about digital / virtual practices of Holy Communion.

To begin, Christian worship is full of symbols. We gather around symbols and signs, and the elements of Holy Communion are one such set of symbols. The Bread and the Wine point to and signify the Body of Christ. Still, Gordon Lathrop in his recently published book *The Assembly*, writes: “The most important symbol of Christ in the room is not the minister, nor the altar, not even the bread and wine or the water of the font. It is the assembly, the body of Christ, as the New Testament”¹ says. As stated, Lathrop

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goes so far as to explore the assembly as the primary sacrament of Christ. He writes: “As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has it, church is Christ existing now as assembly. And as Louis-Marie Chauvet says it, assembly is the primary sacrament of the risen Christ.”² In other words, it could be said that the assembly, the Body of Christ, is the primary sacrament of the Church. In gathering, the assembly constitutes the Body and the Church. Lutherans have long held to a definition of church that places great emphasis on the assembly. Lathrop writes that “Among Lutherans since the sixteenth century, the primary definition of ‘church’ has been ‘the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel’ (Augsburg Confession VII).”³ The Gospel unites the assembly of baptized believers together as the Body of Christ. Again, Lathrop writes, “Among the symbols with which liturgy deals, none is more important than this assembly of believers.”⁴

For Lathrop, “Our gathering with other Christians in a participatory meeting constitutes the most basic symbol of Christianity.”⁵ Without the gathered, participatory assembly, the Church does not seem to exist by this definition. That participatory meeting is the fundamental symbol, sign, and sacrament of Christianity. Still, Lathrop is also convinced that all symbols in the Church are broken symbols. By this, he means that they are often not what the world would expect, they put forth a paradox. He describes it this

2. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 35.

3. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, xi.

4. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, xi.

5. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 1.

1. Gordon Lathrop, *The Assembly: A Spirituality*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), ix.

way: “They are all broken symbols—powerful still in their reference, in the hope they evoke, but made up of the unexpected, the ordinary, the failed, the equivocal rather than the absolute—made up of the cross. These broken symbols gather us—our deepest hopes, our very selves—into the circles of their reference, but then they lead us not to possession or control but to faith.”⁶

Again, for Lathrop, the Christian assembly is something unique. It is not simply a meeting or gathering of people. It is a meeting or gathering with a purpose, gathered around special and significant things: “Christian assemblies are not just any meeting; they are meetings that have a clear and accented center: the presence of Jesus Christ in word and sacrament, in prayer, and in the very gathering itself. Making that center clear and unobstructed, making the symbols that carry that center to be large and beautiful: these tasks continually constitute the renewal to which these assemblies are called.”⁷ The presence of Jesus Christ in the gathering itself is the very center of the assembly. In gathering, the people become the body of the risen Christ.

Although the entire gathered assembly celebrates the sacraments, there is also a called and ordained minister who usually presides at the assembly. This person is tasked with leadership, being called out from the assembly not to rule over it, but to serve. It is the responsibility of that presider / pastor / minister to be attentive to the dynamics of the assembly. Lathrop writes: “A pastor who presides attentively in this assembly, being charged especially with caring for and serving the center of the assembly, will also have a heart for the person who is only tentatively in the room, the person in the back row who seems ready to leave. A gathering that is glad to be together around such a center will also repeatedly be glad to welcome the stranger.”⁸ I wonder, how does the presider—in this digital age—also pay attention to the person who is *virtually* in the back row, the person who participates only through Facebook Live, the person who comments on the YouTube post, the person who engages primarily with the online prayer app. How do we involve all in the assembly, drawing even those on the margins in toward the center that is Jesus Christ? This is a question to return to later in this paper. “‘Strong center, open door’ is one way to articulate the continually reformed assembly...” contends Lathrop.⁹ How are our doors open to the virtual presence of those who wish to join the assembly?

Lathrop writes that “Each local assembly is entirely church, the presence of the eschatological convocation of God...”¹⁰ Each local assembly is wholly Church. In that way, paradoxically perhaps, the assembly is much wider than simply the physical gathering of people in a concrete place and time. Any assembly is so broad that it includes the entire communion of saints in heaven and on earth, and in this way, one could argue that even without technological participation, the assembly already has a virtual component.

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“Assembly, this, is the local Christian gathering, in communion with other gatherings, and the local gathering as the dwelling place of the universal gathering, the clearest place to encounter the whole church.”¹¹

Lathrop draws a hard line in the sand regarding electronic means of worshipping. To begin, he states: “So let it be said clearly: these electronic means we have used have involved memories of assembly, sometimes quite beautiful memories, but not the assembly itself, that classic reality essential to Christianity.”¹² Lathrop is firm in his commitment that “absent the actual presence of human beings to one another and absent their use of material stuff, we did not hold the assembly.”¹³ For Lathrop, digital or virtual gatherings of the assembly are not Church. Because of the lack of physical presence and material things, the assembly is not constituted. “The electronic replacement for place,” he argues, “when it is used as a liturgical gathering tool, comes too close to using pretense in worship.”¹⁴

Part of Lathrop’s conviction has to do with his emphasis on a theology of incarnation. He writes: “A religion that rejoices that God has come among us in the flesh must not support the idea that pixels on a screen are just as real or even more real than an actual place, nor that the digital ‘ether’ is more spiritual than human beings being together bodily.”¹⁵ Here, in my assessment, Lathrop seems to put forth a clear bias against any digital presence. Pixels on a screen, in his words, are not as real as an actual place. By extension, one’s virtual presence through a screen is not a substitute for nor “as real” as one’s physical presence in concrete time and place. Regarding digital or virtual (I prefer digital) sharing of Holy Communion, Lathrop makes his position very clear: “The sacrament is not given to oneself in front of a computer screen...”¹⁶ For Lathrop, communing at home while the presider and assembly is present via screen is not an option, not a sacrament. He argues that “Rather than continuing the emergency electronic means some of us have used when we needed to do so, we need now to

6. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 4.

7. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 6.

8. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 7.

9. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 7.

10. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 23.

11. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 24.

12. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 48.

13. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 48.

14. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 49.

15. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 49.

16. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 50.

recover and restore the biblical and liturgical reality of assembly.”¹⁷

In thinking about what these “emergency electronic means” were, Lathrop writes that “Decisions about what to do about eucharist in this time were then frequently driven by distorted preconceptions, and the question became simply, How can isolated people ‘get’ communion?”¹⁸ The distinction here is between “getting” communion and participating in communion. For Lathrop, it seems, the reception of Holy Communion in the gathered physical assembly is what rightly constitutes the sacrament, not simply the eating and drinking of bread and wine with the proper words. For him, “Assembly, then—the bodily presence of a community in a concrete place—is the place where eucharist occurs, where it takes place.”¹⁹

In pre-digital times, God’s self-mediation was still understood to be a multi-media event, Berger argues. With the emergence of digital possibilities for mediation, however, we must consider a whole new set of questions. Berger writes: “In other words, was the canon of possible ‘TheoMedia’ closed at some point before the digital age? Maybe—and this answer would be convenient for Christian communities born in the technological upheaval of the sixteenth century—after the invention of the printing press? Or do we have to think of God’s media praxis as the ongoing, multi-mediated, living self-disclosure of a Living God? In which case, might sacramental mediations today be shaped by bits and bytes?”²⁰ How is God’s self-revelation ongoing and evolving through new kinds of media? Or, as Berger asks, was the canon of possible Divine self-mediation closed before the digital age? Where and how might God’s self-revelation take place through bits and bytes? These are all questions we must contend with as digital prayer, digital worship, and digital sacramental practice continue to evolve.

There are strong arguments both for and against digitally mediated eucharistic sharing. Opposing such practices, “The main theological conviction brought to bear on digital practices of eucharistic sharing is that the Christian faith is deeply incarnational, and that means wedded to physicality and matter.”²¹ This argument holds that a physical assembly of people in a concrete time and place is the only proper setting for eucharistic sharing. This argument takes seriously the importance of the incarnation, of the Word become flesh. Other arguments against digitally mediated eucharistic sharing are ecclesiological: “Princeton theologian Gordon Mikoski, for example, has argued that offering communion online short-circuits the communal, embodied nature of the Eucharist. Furthermore, Holy Communion becomes an ‘on-demand’ and ‘do-it-yourself’ act when ‘bringing the body to the table’ is mediated by an internet-accessing device.”²² This argument fears

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that digitally mediated Eucharist becomes an overly individualistic practice, dividing the Body of Christ.

This brings us to arguments supporting various kinds of digitally mediated distribution of the Eucharist. Berger outlines two such trajectories: “The first trajectory foregrounds pastoral and missional concerns. The basic convictions here are twofold. First is the conviction that to bring Good News to all wherever they may be found is the calling of the Church. In the words attributed to the ‘media apostle’ Fr. James Alberione, ‘If people do not come to Church, the Church must go where people are.’ Second is the conviction that God’s power to mediate grace is boundless.”²³ As Berger states, the first argument is both pastoral and missional. The Church must go where people are, as Fr. Alberione states, and that includes digital space, social media, etc. Second, as previously discussed, the question is raised concerning God’s power for self-mediation.

Deanna Thompson of St. Olaf College also deals with digitally mediated practices of Holy Communion in her book titled *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World*. She writes: “Whether and how the body of Christ is and can be present virtually in the twenty-first century with those who suffer is a critical question that invites serious theological reflection.”²⁴ For her, this reflection is deeply personal, based on personal experience of illness that kept her from physically gathering with the Christian assembly. She continues by writing “in order to consider the future, we should also reconsider the past and return to the origins of Christian communities and the social networks and cultures of connection envisioned in those earliest communities of faith. Locating resources in the first century and beyond for thinking about how to be the body of Christ will help us move forward in utilizing contemporary technological tools...”²⁵

In thinking about the real/virtual divide, Thompson offers the following: “If we view the virtual and physical worlds as continuous with each other rather than as either/or options, this will help ensure that we do not use virtual presence as a way of bypassing the in-person kind.”²⁶ Furthermore, “it is vital that we

17. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 51.

18. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 64.

19. Lathrop, *The Assembly*, 64.

20. Teresa Berger, @ *Worship: Liturgical Practices in Digital Worlds*. (New York: Routledge, 2018), Location 2757.

21. Berger, @ *Worship*, Location 2861.

22. Berger, @ *Worship*, Location 2865.

23. Berger, @ *Worship*, Location 2917.

24. Deanna Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 44.

25. Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 44.

26. Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 104.

resist seeing recent technological innovations as simply existing in opposition to how we experience life in the material world.²⁷ With these suggestions, Thompson is endeavoring to break down the real / virtual dichotomy that holds the two in opposition or tension. She proposes that we instead view the virtual and physical worlds as continuous, on a spectrum, and not as either/or options. She affirms, an incarnational theology for the current age needs to affirm that being present with others occurs virtually as well as physically.²⁸ An incarnational theology for our current, digital age must embrace virtual presence as equally real presence and as an important tool, particularly in reaching out to the suffering body of Christ.

We now turn to *The Use of the Means of Grace*, the official document governing sacramental practice in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, to see what important contributions there might be to this project. The document describes the Church / assembly, Holy Baptism, Holy Communion, and the mission of the Church. For this project, I am particularly interested in how the sections of this document on the assembly and Holy Communion might speak to the current question of digital means of sharing the Eucharist. The document continues by affirming that “Sunday, the day of Christ’s resurrection and of the appearances to the disciples by the crucified and risen Christ, is the primary day on which Christians gather to worship. Within this assembly, the Word is read and preached and the sacraments are celebrated.”²⁹ Again, the idea that the sacrament is a centered gathering around the fundamentals of Word and Sacrament is repeated. It is also affirmed that Christians principally gather on Sunday, although this of course does not rule out other gatherings of the Christian assembly.

The Use of the Means of Grace goes on to describe: “Assemblies for worship are not limited to Sunday or to celebrations of Word and Sacrament. Christians gather for worship on other days of the week, for morning or evening prayer, for services of the Word or devotions, to mark local and national festivals, and for important life occasions such as weddings and funerals. Christians also gather in their own homes for prayer, Bible reading, and devotions.”³⁰ This principle of the document affirms that in addition to the Sunday assembly, Christians also gather in their homes for prayer, study, devotion, and worship. In my assessment, this principle opens the door to the opportunity for virtual gatherings as a third space in which the assembly gathers, either in place of or separate from the primary Sunday gathering of the church.

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practice.”³¹ This principle affirms that it is the norm for Lutheran congregations to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday and festival. During the pandemic, however, some churches and church leaders took the stance of a eucharistic fast, which disrupts this principle. First, a fast is something chosen as a discipline, whereas we did not choose to not be able to gather together because of COVID-19. Second, the idea of a eucharistic fast is in opposition to this principle. If the Eucharist is celebrated weekly, then many churches felt compelled to take that mandate seriously and to find ways to celebrate Holy Communion through digital means.

In describing the celebration of the sacrament, *The Use of the Means of Grace* affirms: “The gathered people of God celebrate the sacrament. Holy Communion, usually celebrated within a congregation, also may be celebrated in synodical, churchwide, and other settings where the baptized gather.”³² Again, in my assessment, there is an opening here for digital means of eucharistic celebration to find authorization. Holy Communion is usually celebrated in a congregational setting (by which this document clearly implies a concrete physical time and place), but also in other settings where the baptized gather together. One such place where the baptized gather together is in digital space — over Zoom, Skype, Facebook Live, etc. What is to keep these gatherings from being assembly, and what is to restrict the sharing of the Eucharist therein?

And finally, *The Use of the Means of Grace* states that “Congregations provide for communion of the sick, homebound, and imprisoned.”³³ It is the responsibility of the congregation to tend to and nourish those who cannot physically be present with the entire gathered assembly. This is usually done through sending of the sacrament to the sick, homebound, and imprisoned. Digital means for sharing the sacrament have proven to be another way in which those who are sick, homebound, or unable to attend church for any reason are able to receive Holy Communion.

In this paper, we have looked primarily at three ideas: the assembly, digital space, and the Eucharist itself. What we are now faced with is many questions that arise when thinking about these three things together. What, for example, is the nature of the assembly in digital space? Do we stand with Lathrop in holding that the Christian assembly is only the concrete, physical gathering of

27. Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 120.

28. Thompson, *Virtual Body of Christ*, 105.

29. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *The Use of the Means of Grace: A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2017), 13.

30. *Use of the Means of Grace*, 18.

31. *Use of the Means of Grace*, 39.

32. *Use of the Means of Grace*, 44.

33. *Use of the Means of Grace*, 51.

a group of people in a particular space? Or, might the assembly be able to be constituted online? If so, what is the relationship between these two kinds of assemblies? Here, Thompson's suggestion that we treat real and virtual space as a continuum rather than as binary oppositions is perhaps most helpful. What is offered by virtual space that can sustain the Christian assembly? If the assembly is, as Lathrop suggests, the primary sacrament of the presence of the risen Christ, can this assembly truly constitute itself and mediate Christ's presence through virtual means? If not, what do we make of the gatherings that have been assembled as such throughout the pandemic? Have they not truly been Church?

Furthermore, we must ask ourselves, where, when, how, and why/why not the Eucharist can be shared digitally. If it is to be celebrated every Sunday and it is the Word and prayer that consecrates the Eucharist, what is to keep that celebration from being virtual? And, if as Luther advances, the Eucharist is about primarily fellowship and love, cannot one enter into the love and fellowship of the saints through digitally mediated means? These questions will not be easily resolved, but they are questions that are being asked and considered. In this digital age, we ask ourselves, what is the relationship between assembly, digital space, and the sacrament of Holy Communion? This question will not go away but will only become more complex as new technologies become available and our digital lives continue to grow, expand, and change.

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