

ONLINE COMMUNION

THE POSITION OF THE ULMA

Having taken the position that the celebration of the Lord's Supper virtually or remotely is contrary to our confessional understanding of the Lord's institution of the Sacrament, it is prudent for us to provide a more detailed explanation of our position for those who may be interested.

Regarding the efficacy or power of the Scripture as it relates to the Sacraments, we would like to affirm what the Formula of Concord Solid Declaration (hereafter referred to as FCSD) Article VII 74 says: "... no human words or works create the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Supper, whether it be the merit or the speaking of the minister or the eating and drinking or the faith of the communicants. Instead, all this should be ascribed solely to the almighty power of God and to the words, institution, and arrangement of our Lord Jesus Christ."¹ To be clear, we reject the teaching that it is the physical presence of the pastor and/or communicants that creates the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Supper.

We also believe the FCSD Article VII 75 when it says that "... the true and almighty words of Jesus Christ, which He spoke in the first institution of the Supper, were not only effective in the first Supper; they remain so. They retain their validity and power and are still effective, so that in all places in which the Supper is observed according to Christ's institution and His words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed and received on the basis of the power and might of the very same words that Christ spoke in the first Supper. For wherever that which Christ instituted is observed and His words are spoken over the bread and cup and wherever the consecrated bread and cup are distributed, Christ himself exercises His power through the spoken words, which are still His Word, by virtue of the first institution."² So, we believe that the Words of Institution are not a magical incantation but the last will and testament of Jesus by which He gave and continues to give what He promises. This meal is the new testament or covenant in Christ's blood, and "no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified," as Paul says in Galatians 3:15.

It bears repeating that we have no doubt of the efficacy of the Word no matter how it is delivered. As far as the Sacraments are concerned, Abraham Calov writes: "The essence of the Sacraments consists in their administration and cannot exist except in use..."³ They are God's Holy Word attached to

1 The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. (2001). In R. Kolb & T. J. Wengert (Eds.), *The Book of Concord The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (p. 606). Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press.

2 Ibid., p. 606.

3 Preus, R. D. (1970). *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*. In *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism* (Vol. I, p. 368). Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia.

physical elements. In the case of the Lord's Supper, the power of the real presence lies in the words "... this is My body ... this is My blood ..." since the Holy Spirit is perpetually connected to those words. However, the words are not the only thing that determines the validity or benefit of the Lord's Supper. God's Word is to be attached to bread and wine to be used in a specific way. Thus, the FCSD Article VII 85 states: "In order to preserve this true Christian teaching on the Holy Supper and to avoid and eliminate many kinds of idolatrous abuses and perversions of this testament, this useful rule and guide is taken from the Words of Institution: nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use [*usus*] instituted by Christ or the divinely instituted action [*actio*]."⁴ One cannot consider the validity or benefit of the Sacrament of the Altar only on the argument of the efficacy of the Scripture, but one must also include its use or divinely instituted action.

The Word and the Sacraments are distinct, as David P. Scaer reminds us in his book "Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace." He writes: "Sacraments are uniquely the church's possessions and fittingly take place within the fellowship of the church. While preaching can take place within both the world and the church, the Sacraments belong to the church, which alone has the prerogative and command to administer them. Even when the Sacraments are administered apart from the regularly, assembled congregation, as in the cases of an emergency baptism or administration of the Supper to the sick and homebound, they are still offered within the context of the church's fellowship. Sacraments are not autonomous rites to be administered apart from the proclamation of the Gospel."⁵ They are administered in keeping with the Gospel "charter," namely, with the approval of God's Word.⁶ A layperson can administer Baptism in an emergency because of what the Scripture says of Baptism. A pastor can administer the Sacrament of the Altar to the sick and homebound, as it is still in keeping with the approval of Scripture. It is one thing to champion the power of the Gospel, but we cannot do this without realizing that the Gospel is also the charter of the Lord's Supper.

By virtue of 1 Corinthians 10:16 we believe the Formula of Concord (FCSD VII 79), that "... in the administration of the Holy Supper the Words of Institution are to be clearly and plainly spoken or sung publicly in the congregation, and in no case are they to be omitted."⁷ However, we also believe that "... this 'blessing' or the recitation of the Words of Institution of Christ by itself does not make a valid sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as Christ administered it, is not observed ... (FCSD VII 83)."⁸ What then do the Lutheran Confessions believe to be the "entire action" of the Supper? Answering this question is critical, for as already stated "... nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use [*usus*] instituted by Christ or the divinely instituted action [*actio*] (FC SD VII 85)."⁹

⁴ The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 607-608.

⁵ Scaer, D. P. (2008). Law and gospel and the means of grace. In *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace* (p. 141). St. Louis, Missouri: Luther Academy.

⁶ Ibid., 142.

⁷ The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 607.

⁸ Ibid., 607.

⁹ Ibid., 608.

The FCSD Article VII 84 states: “... Christ’s command, ‘Do this,’ must be observed without division or confusion. For it includes the entire action or administration of this sacrament: that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord’s death is proclaimed, as St. Paul presents the entire action of the breaking of bread or its distribution and reception in 1 Corinthians 10[:16].”¹⁰ The command of Christ “Do this” includes the entire action or administration of the Supper in a Christian assembly, as delineated by the Formula. The Lutheran Confessions include the Christian assembly as a part of the entire action of the Supper as commanded by Jesus. They also include that the Lord’s death is to be publicly proclaimed, as it says in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (hereafter referred to as APAC) Article IV 210, “... that we might publicly confess our faith and proclaim the benefits of Christ, just as Paul states [1 Cor. 11:26] ...”¹¹ As one can see, the Lutheran Confessions do not see a Christian assembly around the Lord’s Supper as descriptive, but prescriptive. And the church throughout her history has always known what a Christian assembly is.

This truth is further emphasized by the FCSD Article VII 85-87, which states: “In order to preserve this true Christian teaching on the Holy Supper and to avoid and eliminate many kinds of idolatrous abuses and perversions of this testament, this useful rule and guide is taken from the Words of Institution: nothing has the character of a sacrament apart from the use [*usus*] instituted by Christ or the divinely instituted action [*actio*].” (That is, when Christ’s institution is not observed as He established it, there is no sacrament.) This rule dare not be rejected in any way, but it can and should be followed and preserved in the church of God with great benefit. The *usus* or *actio* (that is, the practice or administration) does not refer primarily to faith or to the oral partaking, but to the entire external, visible administration of the Supper, as Christ established the administration of the Supper: the consecration, or Words of Institution, and the distribution and reception or oral partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, Christ’s body and blood. Apart from this practice it is not to be regarded as a sacrament ...”¹² As one can see, virtual communion is no small issue and cannot be simply boiled down to a matter revolving around the efficacy of the Gospel. Also, this is not a matter of adiaphora. Correctly defined, adiaphora are matters of indifference, matters that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture.

Before we get back to the question about what constitutes a Christian assembly and her altar fellowship, we would like to say a few words about the Corinthian Christians and their struggles with Holy Communion in 1 Corinthians 11. Deeply concerning are the words of Paul written in 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, “When you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.” The apostle then writes to them the instructions that Christ gave to him regarding the Lord’s Supper. In conclusion, Paul writes in verses

¹⁰ Ibid., 607.

¹¹ Ibid., 152.

¹² Ibid., 607-608.

33-34: “So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another - if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home - so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.” Here is an example of how playing with the Supper according to one’s own pleasure apart from God’s Word and outside the church community can be disastrous.

Now, back to the question: What constitutes a Christian assembly and her altar fellowship? In the controversy at hand, it all seems to boil down to how you finally answer the previous and following question: Is the church a virtual church and can Holy Communion be practiced virtually, that is, without physicality? For some, this is an open question. For us it is not. Correctly defined, open questions are such questions as inevitably arise in our study of the Scriptural doctrines but are not answered by Scripture at all or at least not clearly. One should approach this with caution. Just because online communion did not exist in the time of Jesus and the apostles does not mean that Scripture has nothing to say regarding what constitutes a Christian assembly and her altar fellowship. And if some wish to “tinker” with the Scriptural and Confessional definitions, then they need to provide a clear Word from God to ratify their positions, instead of leaving us with nothing but opinions, inventions, and noble intentions.

Having said that, what is the Church? The Ap AC VII/VIII 5 states: “... the church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations but is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel of Christ. Moreover, this church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by His Spirit as Paul testifies in Ephesians 1 [:22-23], when he says, ‘And [God] has made Him the head over all things for the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all.’ Therefore, those in whom Christ is not active are not members of Christ.”¹³

The Church is the body of Christ. It is principally an association of faith. It is internal and invisible. Nevertheless, it has external marks. It is local, locatable, visible where one finds body and soul people publicly gathered around the pure preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the Sacraments. This internal association of faith and the external marks of the church necessarily creates and preserves her fellowship (*koinonia*). For example, in the Ap AC XXIV 70 it says, “Just as the Word was given to awaken this faith, so also the sacrament was instituted in order that, as the outward form meets the eyes, it might move the heart to believe. For the Holy Spirit works through the Word and the sacrament.”¹⁴ This is New Testament worship, the gathered, recognized body of Christ, faith seeing bread and wine, remembering Christ’s benefits, to receive life, and acknowledging in the Supper the will and mercy of God. And, it also should be added, as Kurt Marquart does when he writes: the fellowship of the church, “... is first of all a ‘vertical’ but then also a ‘horizontal’ relationship among holy persons, mediated by ‘holy things.’”¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 174.

¹⁴ Ibid., 271.

¹⁵ Marquart, K. E. (1995). The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance. In *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance* (p. 41). Fort Wayne, Indiana: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research.

The fellowship (*koinonia*) of the church flows from Christ who is the Word made flesh. In Jesus, “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (Col. 2:9).” We receive His body in the Supper and so we partake of “the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:22-23).” And this fellowship of the Supper is of two kinds. First, we partake of Christ. Secondly, we permit all Christians, who are members of the body of Christ, to be partakers of us, in whatever way they and we are Scripturally able.¹⁶ As Marquart writes, “All these sublime realities of the church’s life are ours by faith (*sola fide*, cf. Gal. 5:6). Yet although these mysteries ‘spill over’ into the practicalities of daily life, and become embodied there, we have no direct, experiential access to their inner nature and splendor.”¹⁷ When the Supper is virtual, what part of partaking of Christ are we permitting others to partake of in us when we are not completely there? Do all the sublime realities of the church’s life that are ours by faith make their way through the internet into the practicalities of daily life, that is, into the bodily community of the local congregation? We are not merely talking about a collection for the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 9:13).

After quoting Herman Sasse, where he writes in “Communio Sanctorum” [1975], “The *κοινωνία* of the body and blood of Christ coincides with the *κοινωνία* of the church,” Marquart then footnotes Luther: “The Latin word *communio* means ‘fellowship,’ and this is what scholars call the holy sacrament ... Fellowship is of two kinds ... The first kind of fellowship is inward, spiritual, and invisible, for it is in the heart. It means that through faith, hope, and love a man is incorporated into the fellowship of Christ and all the saints – as signified and given in the sacrament ... The second fellowship is outward, physical, and visible. It means that a man is allowed to participate in the holy sacrament, to receive it and to partake of it together with others (*A Sermon on the Ban* [1520], LW, 39:7-8; WA 6:63-64).”¹⁸ If the body and blood of Christ coincides with the *koinonia* of the church (vertically and horizontally), is it enough for her to be online? Should the association of faith that is manifest in her marks and is known in all works of love in the community of saints be restricted by virtuality? Is the external community of saints the reality or is it online? *Going online mostly internalizes what should be externalized.* Some may say that physicality is just one component and no big deal, but that is conjecture, and minimizes the seriousness of the Supper as the Testament of Christ. The FCSD VII 44 reminds us that Jesus “... instituted this most holy sacrament, which is to be used until the end of the world with great reverence and in all obedience. It is to be a continual memorial of His bitter suffering and death and of all His benefits, a seal of the New Testament, a comfort for all troubled hearts, and a continual bond and union of Christ’s people with Christ their head and among themselves.”¹⁹

Now, for those who imagine a virtual church and online communion, they do so because they firmly maintain that being together online sufficiently meets the requirements of Scripture where it says that we are to gather together (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:20, 33). In other words, they believe that being online is sufficiently close enough to being physically, bodily together in one place. That is their opinion.

16 Luther, M., Bachmann, E. T., & Lehmann, H. T. (1960). Luther’s works. In Luther’s Works (Vol. 35, p. 67). Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press.

17 Marquart, K. E. (1995). The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance, 42.

18 Ibid., 42.

19 The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 600.

However, common sense tells us that this is not true. Try to convince yourself and your spouse that being online is sufficient and meets the requirements of physically being with him or her in a particular place. Try having your traditional thanksgiving dinner online with your family and friends who are scattered wherever. Consider the value of meeting people face to face. Even kids who play online games with their friends show that there is something missing when they get together at a house, with consoles and screens in hand, to play online games with each other in the same room.

Yes, common sense tells us otherwise, but what about Scripture? Before we answer that question, perhaps the problem for many, and we include ourselves, is that love is in danger of becoming cold as we are bombarded by cold technology. Love was also at stake in Luther's day when he wrote in 1519: "Christians cared for one another, supported one another, sympathized with one another, bore one another's burdens and affliction. This has all disappeared, and now there remain only the many masses and the many who receive the sacrament without in the least understanding or practicing what it signifies."²⁰ One would think that the manifestation of what the Supper signifies would require an understanding and an administration as it was instituted in the first place. What will happen to love as communion goes online and is no longer understood or done according to Christ's institution? Common sense warns us. What about Scripture?

In an article titled "Liturgical Commonplaces," Kurt Marquart quotes Ernest Eckhardt's "Reallexicon" (1907-1917) to express the proper understanding of the Lord's Supper. The first two of three points are the following: "The Lord's Supper ought to be administered publicly and corporately, because (a) Christ and the apostles did it that way; (b) the Lord's Supper is a public confession, proclaiming the Lord's death (1 Cor. 11), but a proclamation does not usually happen in a corner ..." ²¹ We take "corner" to refer to those times of severe and life-threatening persecution or when one is truly homebound.

What the "Reallexicon" is confessing is what the early church called "synaxis." Our Lutheran Confessions refer to synaxis favorably when addressing the term "mass," while rejecting the idea that one can benefit from an act apart from one's disposition, or presence, as in the case of a mass for one who is dead (*ex opere operato*). The Ap AC XXIV 79-80 asks the opponents, "Why do they omit here the old term 'Communion,' [synaxis] which shows that the Mass was formerly the Communion of many?" ²² Why they omitted it was obvious. It caused them trouble in their position. The point is that the Supper belongs to the Christian community, to those of faith and who are genuinely there to eat, not in purgatory, nor those living but not eating. In Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 11:20, 33 we have the verb form of synaxis. Paul uses the verb form in statements to speak of Christians gathering and coming together. In the case of Acts 20:7, we have Christians coming together for "the breaking of bread," the Lord's Supper.

²⁰ Luther, M., Bachmann, E. T., & Lehmann, H. T. (1960). Luther's Works, Vol. 35, 57.

²¹ Marquart, K. E. (1978). Liturgical Commonplaces. Concordia Theological Quarterly, 42, Number 4, 337.

²² The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 272.

Physically gathering as a church for the Sacrament of the Altar is an incontrovertible constant throughout the New Testament. We know of nothing that would refute this, and no approval or permission from the testator to do otherwise. Christ was physically present with His physical apostles (Matt. 26:20; 26-28), giving physical elements in a physical place, with Christ giving His essential body and blood to essentially present people gathered in one place to eat and drink. The apostles set up the Lord's Supper in the ancient church in the same way, with an exception (Acts 2:42-47; 20:7). Christ committed His physical administration of the Sacrament to the one gospel ministry (a physically present pastor) for the physically gathered Church. He set up an administrant in His place to remind us of the Chief Shepherd who feeds and leads us now and forever (1 Pet. 5:4; Eph. 4:11-16). We are looking forward to a spiritual and physical heaven.

Here the proponents of online communion might cry "Foul! If they would have had our technology, the apostles would have done it in those days too, especially Paul! Luther would have embraced it as he did the printing press!" Yes, they did not have the internet. But we think that if the Holy Spirit could anticipate the many ways whereby the Gospel might be heard in the modern world, and give us a good conscience to use them, which He has, then He could have done so with virtual communion, which He has not. And we have already shown that our Lutheran forefathers understood the difference between Word and Sacrament.

In Luke 22:19 Jesus says: "This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." In these words, Jesus is directing His disciples to repeat this meal until His return. This meal is the ongoing giving of Christ's once and for all sacrifice, which anticipates its consummation in heaven, where all veils are removed, and gone is the old order of things. As Werner Elert writes: "...it is in the Eucharist itself that the congregation experiences the being gathered together which they ask of God."²³ Yes, we look forward to the eschatological synaxis of God's holy people. Virtual church and communion, we believe, is a movement away from this. The local congregation was established as the continuance of the upper room until we reach the most upper room in the face of Jesus. Here the body of Christ is both a body of faith and a physical body of disciples and shepherd, and thus it will be Jesus and us forever with a resurrected body while dwelling in a new creation (Rev. 22:2).

The purpose of the "*remembrance*" is not only to recall Jesus in general, but to consider the institution of the sacrament and what it forever gives. Such remembrance is done in preaching about the Supper, in speaking the Words of Institution, and when the body and blood of Christ are received often. Again, as we have already quoted, the FCSD VII 84 asserts, and we wholeheartedly agree, "... Christ's command, 'Do this,' must be observed without division or confusion. For it includes the entire action or administration of this sacrament: that in a Christian assembly bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, and drunk, and that thereby the Lord's death is proclaimed ..."²⁴ Lest we forget, this is to be a public proclamation of "the Lord's death until He comes," as Paul

²³ Elert, W. (1966). Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries. In N. E. Nagel (Trans.), *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (p. 25). St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia.

²⁴ The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 607.

says in 1 Corinthians 11:26. We appreciate the words of Elert when he writes: “Whether in a single celebration of the Lord’s Supper there are ten or a hundred Christians who participate, this makes no difference as far as the eschatological character of this synaxis is concerned.”²⁵ To paraphrase Elert in his next sentence: “as synaxis, the Lord’s Supper is the dawn of the last things.” We believe that online communion is going eschatologically backward.

We could stop here. As we have expressed, we have no problem with resting on words such as these: “This is the way Jesus and the apostles did it, it is the last will and testament of Christ, and no one should add or nullify to what is ratified by the testator unless he gives us permission, and when we search for the approval of the testator to do things differently as in the case of virtual communion, we do not find such permission. Consequently, we will maintain that the Sacrament of the Altar is for the local church as we have always understood what constitutes the local congregation. It is a public proclamation and does not usually happen in a corner. We will do it this way because Christ and the apostles did it this way. To do otherwise, is playing with the body of Christ, which is a truth that is way beyond us, and should remain undisturbed.”

While what has been written so far will be sufficient for most, it may not be sufficient for all. Nothing ever is when someone really wants to do something thinking that it is for the good of God’s Church. **But this is the Lord’s Church and Supper, not ours.** We are not so bold as to “tinker” with the last will and testament of Christ or create what might be termed a semi-visible or an almost local church. The bottom line is that what we have said so far, will not necessarily push back the argument in some minds that gathering online is sufficiently close enough to coming together (synaxis) as a church for communion. So, is there anything more that might help to persuade those who advocate virtual church and online communion? Perhaps it might do some good to pursue a deeper consideration of the third point of the “Reallexicon” (1907/1917): “The Lord’s Supper ought to be administered publicly and corporately, because ... (c) It is a tie of fellowship. Communion. 1 Cor. 10:17: One Body.”²⁶

At this point, we would like to consider Herman Sasse’s essay titled, “The Lord’s Supper in the New Testament [1941],” and more specifically, the ending section titled, “The Theological Meaning of the Lord’s Supper.” In Sasse, we will clearly see that “this fellowship [the Lord’s Supper], this *koinonia*, that binds Christ to His church and the members of the church to one another is something utterly unique, a *koinonia* for which there is no analogy at all either in religious fellowships of the world or in human community life.”²⁷ This alone should put on the brakes when it comes to any novelty that might interfere with the utter uniqueness of the Supper. If there is no analogy to the Supper, then **adding to or removing anything from it will make it ordinary.** Sasse goes on to write, “If

²⁵ Closed Communion? Admission to the Lord’s Supper in Biblical Lutheran perspective. (2017). In M. C. Harrison & J. T. Pless (Eds.), *Closed Communion? Admission to the Lord's Supper in Biblical Lutheran Perspective* (p. 390). St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia.

²⁶ Marquart, K. E. (1978). Liturgical Commonplaces, 337.

²⁷ Sasse, H. (1985). We Confess the Sacraments. In N. Nagel (Trans.), *We Confess The Sacraments* (Vol. 2, We Confess Series, p. 94). St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia.

we find that Paul is merely applying to the church the simile common in ancient sociology of a body and its members, there is no problem at all; and it would be immediately understood if the apostle said of the church in this sense: 'We, though many, are one body in Christ' (Rom. 12:5)."²⁸ If it is the case, that Scripture proclaims the church as a body in the sociological sense of the term, then online communion might not be a problem for us. However, Sasse correctly notes, "The puzzle begins at the point where Paul no longer designates the church as a body in Christ but as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; cf. v. 13; Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:23; 4:12, 16). For the statement 'You are the body of Christ' (1 Cor. 12:27) contains much more than a comparison between the church and a body."²⁹

The Scriptural teaching that the Church is the body of Christ in Paul is indissolubly bound up with his view of the Lord's Supper, as 1 Cor. 10:16-17 shows: "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is *one* bread, we who are many are *one* body, for we all partake of the *one* bread." The body of Christ is given to us with the bread and is membership in the church as the body of Christ. Body of Christ is the bread of the Lord's Supper, but body of Christ is also mysteriously the church. This is to be understood "realistically," and cannot be otherwise, unless we empty the Supper of the essential body of Christ.³⁰

The FCSD VII 126 reminds us, "Christ Himself, true God and man, who is truly and essentially present in the Supper when it is rightly used, should be adored in spirit and in truth in all places but especially where His community is assembled."³¹ If this is to be understood realistically, that the essential body of Christ is given to the church and it becomes the body of Christ, what happens when we toy with either side? Let us start with the obvious. If one removes the essential body of Christ from the bread, what does that mean for the church as the body of Christ? Conversely, and not so obvious and easy to answer, what are the consequences of removing the essential body of believers gathered to receive the essential body of Christ in the Sacrament? If one removes the physical assembly of the body of believers from the Supper how does that potentially touch the person and work of Christ? What is it to Him who is the Word made flesh and did all things in the flesh for us? Does the absence of synaxis imply that there will be no resurrection on the last day? Does the absence of synaxis imply that He will not gather us together in the end and take us to the place where He has gone? Does the absence of synaxis imply that we are not with Him as He is with us? Does the absence of synaxis imply that the public proclamation of His death until He comes is null and void, or that there is no public proclamation at all?

Sasse writes: "When the heavenly body of Christ is given to us Christians in the Lord's Supper, we become the church as the body of Christ on earth."³² Sasse is talking about what is called in Lutheran theology "the mystical body of Christ," and it is mystical not in the sense that it is without physicality, but because it is beyond us, like the sacramental union. He goes on to write that the mystical body is

²⁸ Ibid., 94

²⁹ Ibid., 94-95

³⁰ Ibid., 95.

³¹ The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 615.

³² Sasse, H. (1985). We Confess the Sacraments, 95.

“... the church, which not only resembles a body but is the body of Christ on earth. Both belong inseparably together, just as the Lord’s Supper and the church go together and, rightly understood, are one. Where the Lord’s true body is received in the Sacrament, it does not remain without effect in the world. There the church is built as the body of Christ on earth and grows toward the consummation (Eph. 4:12-16).”³³ In an earlier part in his essay, Sasse remarks, “Like the past, the future also becomes present in the Lord’s Supper.”³⁴

The Lord’s Supper is the deepest fellowship with God and with all the children of God that there can be for human beings. Christ not only lives among us but in us. Sasse then writes, and this is crucial for our discussion, “This fellowship is not only spiritual, as Christian idealism has always thought, but spiritual-physical [*geistleiblich*], just as the redeeming work of Christ affects the whole person, body and soul. One can only understand the Lord’s Supper of the New Testament and its meaning for the church if one does not forget what the modern Christian unfortunately has forgotten, again and again, that we belong to the church not only according to the spirit but also according to the body: ‘Do you not know that your bodies are the members of Christ?’ (1 Cor. 6:15). Therefore, as the New Testament makes quite clear, the Lord’s Supper stands as the future becoming present in connection with the resurrection of the body.”³⁵

Again, it is called the mystical body of Christ because it is truly beyond us. It is both spiritual and physical. The reference to 1 Corinthians 6:15a is startling. Consider with those words what Paul says surrounding them (13b-15): “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by His power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!” This section shows how the misuse of one’s physical body as a member of the body of Christ touches not only our relationship with Christ but the other members of His body. Paul closes by saying in verses 19-20, “You (plural) are not your own, for you (plural) were bought with a price. So, glorify God in your (plural) body (singular).” What we do with our body is to increase God’s honor and glory, and a part of that is how we use the body for the other members of the body.

We have already shown some of this above when we referred to Luther saying that fellowship is of two kinds. We partake of Christ. And we permit others to be partakers of us. In addition to what we have said, in Ephesians 4:12-16, we read that Christ gave the church the one, gospel ministry, physical pastors, “... to equip the saints for the work of service, for building up the body of Christ ...” This is more than virtual. Also, in Romans 12:4-5, Paul writes: “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his

³³ Ibid., 96.

³⁴ Ibid., 91.

³⁵ Ibid., 96.

teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” Paul reminds us in 1 Cor. 12:24-26, “God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” And finally, we read in Ephesians 5:28-30, “In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of His body.” Of course, Paul is writing in the context of Baptism and presenting the church to Jesus in splendor. Still, as Marquart quotes Sasse, “Fellowship is founded in Baptism and finds its concrete expression in the Sacrament of the breaking of bread. That corresponds exactly to the usage of Paul: God has called the believers ‘into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.’ ‘By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and all were made to drink of one Spirit’ (1 Cor. 1:9; 12:13). The connection with the Lord’s Supper becomes quite clear (1 Cor. 10:16f.).”³⁶

In commenting on 1 Corinthians 10:17, where Paul writes, “Because there is *one* bread, we who are many are *one* body, for we all partake of the *one* bread,” Chrysostom writes in his “Homilies on First Corinthians”: “For what is the bread? The Body of Christ. And what do they become who partake of it? The Body of Christ: not many bodies, but one body. For as the bread consisting of many grains is made one, so that the grains nowhere appear; they exist indeed, but their difference is not seen by reason of their conjunction; so are we conjoined both with each other and with Christ: there not being one body for thee, and another for thy neighbor to be nourished by, but the very same for all. Wherefore he adds, ‘For we all partake of the one bread.’”³⁷ Notice the connection between body of Christ in the bread and church who receives it and becomes the body of Christ. While Chrysostom is talking about the one body, he then moves on to the body as local congregation.

Chrysostom goes on to write, “Now if we are all nourished of the same and all become the same, why do we not also show forth the same love, and become also in this respect one? For this was the old way too in the time of our forefathers ... For He gave not simply even His own body; but because the former nature of the flesh which was framed out of earth, had first become deadened by sin and destitute of life; He brought in, as one may say, another sort of dough and leaven, His own flesh, by nature indeed the same, but free from sin and full of life; and gave to all to partake thereof, that being nourished by this and laying aside the old dead material, we might be blended together unto that which is living and eternal, by means of this table.”³⁸

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Gregory J. Lockwood has this footnote after quoting Chrysostom: “See Sasse for a reference to a sermon by Luther on the Sacrament of the Altar, where Luther uses

³⁶ Marquart, K. E. (1995). *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, 42.

³⁷ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Chrysostom: *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*. (2004). In P. Schaff (Ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* (Fourth ed., Vol. 12, First Series, p. 140). Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 140.

Chrysostom's imagery: '[Luther] compares the unity and communion of the Church with the one bread, which has been made from many grains, and the wine, which has been produced from many grapes.' Sasse then quotes Luther: 'Through the interchange of His blessings and our misfortunes [we] become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common.' (This is My Body, 111-12, citing WA 2, 748, 7ff)."³⁹ To have all things in common includes our physical body within the boundaries of Scripture, and for that to be in common with others would mean that it must be there. Can those who insist upon a virtual church and a virtual communion be right when they say that we have all things in common except our physical body? We hardly think so.

Before we leave Chrysostom, we want to highlight another point he made when commenting on 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Now if we are all nourished of the same and all become the same, why do we not also show forth the same love, and become also in this respect one?" It is at this point that we should make a few observations about the supper as an expression of oneness in doctrine and love. This naturally opens a discussion of the Scriptural practice of close or closed communion. Some would reassure us that this can be done online. What they fail to see is that the practice of closed communion is more than seeing a screen with someone in the church directory who happens to be counted as a communicant member. The local congregation is not void of interactions with one another and dealing with matters of confession and life, although it may feel that way in some of our local congregations. There are those who sadly show up for an hour on Sunday one minute before the service, and then leave immediately after, which feels no different than seeing them online. We should be careful that we do not lull ourselves into thinking that this is okay. Such should be admonished by preaching and teaching that would address the fellowship of the church doctrinally and as it relates to the confession of the saints, the bond of love, which embraces all good works. Also, the binding and loosing that goes on at the rail cannot be divorced from that which is manifest in the lives of God's people. Pastors, or for that matter members of the congregation, cannot be content with seeing a face on a screen while saying to themselves, "all is well." The instructions from God's Word are about relationships and lead to all good works. While oneness characterizes the entire church, that oneness is expressed in the local congregation with real people confessing to one another and doing brotherly and sisterly works for one another, as well as bearing with one another's faults (Col. 3:13). There is something to being there. Also, in those relationships there is sin that must be dealt with as one confronts another, where witnesses may bear witness, where the church must listen, where two or three are gathered in the name (Matt. 18:15-20; 5:24).

For all of this stated, we must hold fast to our understanding that communion in the virtual realm is contrary to the establishment of the Savior and thus not acceptable in His Church.

³⁹ Lockwood, G. J. (2010). 1 Corinthians. In *1 Corinthians* (p. 343). St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia.