

Guidance for the Church on the Practice of “Virtual Eucharist” in a Time of Pandemic
Craig L. Nesson
Wartburg Theological Seminary

At this time of acute crisis, many are seeking ways to minister with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in caring and compassionate ways. This includes amazing innovations in proclaiming the Gospel through digital media that have promise for the church in its mission to break out of its walls and reach new publics in powerful ways. The emerging adaptive leadership is astounding.

For a church that places the celebration of the Eucharist at the center of our life together, there is profound grief for the present circumstances when public health requires us not to gather in person for worship and for sharing the Lord’s Supper. I experience this grief as one who serves in the worship-centered community of Wartburg Theological Seminary where weekly Eucharist is the heartbeat of our gathered community.

The preciousness of the Eucharist has led to debates and experiments in the practice of “virtual Eucharist.” While the intention in practicing virtual Eucharist involves deep compassion for God’s people, there are compelling reasons to proceed with caution and mutual consultation before implementing a practice that has long term implications both for local worshipping communities in congregations and for the church catholic.

My reflections would have us center ourselves in remaining deliberate and intentional in our Eucharistic practices, lest we create divisions within the body of Christ that will require future repair. *Above all, it is imperative that we give full energy in our witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the life of the world by preserving unity in our witness during this time of pandemic.*

In the words of St. Paul: “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1Cor 1:10). In that spirit I offer the following guidance to our church in a time of pandemic. Be gentle with yourself, dear church!

Real Presence: The Power of the Living Word of God

1. On the Power of the Living Word of God. In the beginning the Living Word of God summoned all creation into existence and in the fullness of time the Living Word of God became incarnate in the human flesh of Jesus Christ. The Living Word of God is efficacious to accomplish God’s holy purposes.
2. On Sacraments as Visible Words. The Living Word of God, spoken in the Words of Institution, mediates divine power to manifest the real presence of Jesus Christ in the elements of bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We need to reclaim the sacramental significance of this Living Word of God as a means of grace for the life of the world in this time of fear, grief, and despair.
3. On Eucharistic Community. The church is constituted as “the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly” (Augsburg Confession 7). While the Living Word of God may lend efficacy to a virtual Eucharist, it is not only bread and wine in accord with the Words of Institution that belong to the Lord’s Supper but

also an “assembly.” At best a virtual Eucharist remains an approximation of that meal in Jesus’ name which occurs in a place where the assembly is gathered.

Eucharist: Sacrament of Unity

1. On the Unity of the Church in the New Testament. The New Testament witness is clear on those things that make for the unity of the church: One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism (Ephesians 4:5); One Bread, One Body, One Cup (1 Cor 10:16-17).
2. On Divisions in the Church. The controversy at Corinth was not about the efficacy of the Lord’s Supper but about divisions within the church in the practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper.
3. On the Controversy at Corinth. The exercise of Christian freedom involves assuming the posture of servant in respecting the weak within the body of Christ for the sake of the mission of the Gospel (1 Cor 9:19-23). The Corinthian practice in celebrating the Lord’s Supper exacerbated divisions within the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 11:17-22).

The Mission of the Gospel: Efficacy and Ecclesiology

1. On Efficacy and the Unity of the Church. The question before us is not about the efficacy of the Living Word of God to accomplish divine purposes but the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity. What are the consequences of the practice of virtual Eucharist for increasing or decreasing unity within the church of Jesus Christ?
2. On Ecclesiology and the Unity of the Church. The question before us involves the character of the one holy catholic apostolic church. What are the implications of the practice of virtual Eucharist for full communion within a denomination and for full communion within the universal body of Christ?
3. On Eucharist in a Time of Pandemic. The question before us is whether the practice of virtual Eucharist, now sparking division within the church, is “beneficial” at a time when we are called to unify our Gospel witness for the life of the world. “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial” (1 Cor 6:12).

These brief reflections offer guidance to the church on the practice of “virtual Eucharist.” While theological reasons can be offered for the efficacy of virtual Eucharist, *the ecclesiological consequences for disrupting the unity of the church lead me to counsel refraining from this practice.* This is especially true in a time of pandemic when a unified witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ is needful for the life of the world, specifically for those most vulnerable among us.

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross” (Phil 2:5-8).