

Theological Opinions of the Consistory of the COELC

XIX

On Online Communion

Adopted in June 2020

Terminology

This current controversy has been referred to by many terms: Online Communion, Virtual Communion, Internet Communion, Skype Communion.

The most frequently used term for this practice has been “*Online Communion*” therefore, for the sake of this document we shall refer to this practice as Online Communion.

State of the controversy

After the many lockdowns caused by the spread of the COVID-19 Corona-Virus some pastors, claiming the name Lutheran, have encouraged communion at home with the consecration of the elements taking place via electronic media.

The question is really twofold: 1: Would a consecration done through electronic media be a valid consecration? and 2. If the consecration is valid, is it permissible for a pastor to consecrate and administer communion this way?

1. Is consecration of elements through the internet valid?

It has been claimed that since the Word alone makes something a Sacrament and since Online Communion is not strictly forbidden in the Scripture or the *Book of Concord*, it is a valid sacrament.

First we must consider, by what method this issue is to be solved.

In the *Augsburg Confession* article XIII, we teach: “*Of the Use of the Sacraments they [the Lutherans] teach that the Sacraments were ordained, not only to be marks of profession among men, but rather to be signs and testimonies of the will of God toward us, instituted to awaken and confirm faith in those who use them. Wherefore we must so use the Sacraments that faith be added to believe the promises which are offered and set forth through the Sacraments.*” (.1-2)

The Sacraments are signs of God’s will toward us. Therefore, when we are dealing with the promises of Christ in the Sacrament, the issue is not whether something is clearly forbidden, but whether we can be certain that what we do has the promise attached to it. An uncertain Sacrament is of no benefit. The only reason to argue from what has not been forbidden instead of from what is certain is that one does not seek certainty in the Sacraments. The Sacrament is then turned into a sign of the faith of the believer instead of a sign of God’s promise

We must therefore establish the validity not from what has been forbidden, but from what has been commanded and promised by Christ.

This is what the Words concerning the bread state:

And He took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” (Luke 22:19)

Two things are important for our topic: 1) Jesus refers to specific bread that He has taken and given to them. 2) Jesus says: “do this”.

First, we must consider the fact that Jesus took specific bread and said “this is My body”. Not all bread in the house or in hearing distance from Jesus became His body. Specific bread was consecrated with His Word.

The certainty must be in the fact that the Words of Institution are spoken with reference to specific elements, which can only happen if the one speaking the Words, by some kind of gesture, can point out those elements.

The elements that are communion with the Lord's body and blood are the elements that are blessed as 1 Corinthians 10:16 states: *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ?*

This text is interpreted by the *Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration* article VII: "So also that repetition, confirmation, and explanation of the Words of Christ which St. Paul makes 1 Cor. 10:16, where he writes as follows: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" is to be considered with all diligence and seriousness [accuracy], as an especially clear testimony of the true, essential presence and distribution of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper. From this we clearly learn that not only the cup which Christ blessed at the first Supper, and not only the bread which Christ broke and distributed, but also that which we break and bless, is the communion of the body and blood of Christ, so that all who eat this bread and drink of this cup truly receive, and are partakers of, the true body and blood of Christ." (.54)

It is therefore the bread and wine which we break and bless by consecrating it, that is the Lord's body and blood.

When nothing is taken by the one speaking, it is unclear what has been set apart and blessed by the Words of Institution. The Words have a specific reference, which must be clear if we are to know that we have is a valid sacrament.

If the fact that the communicants at home take bread and intend to have it consecrated is what makes the difference between the bread they use for Online Communion and all other bread within earshot, then the intention of the receivers and not the Word is what consecrates. Thus, the validity of the Sacrament would no longer rest on God's Word alone but upon the intention of the recipients. This should be condemned as Calvinism.

The Words of the speaker in Online Communion does not refer to the specific bread taken by the communicants, since the speaker does not single out that particular bread. For the Word of God alone to consecrate, that Word must be used with reference to specific bread and wine. It is therefore necessary for a valid consecration, that the speaker of the Words of Institution singles out specific bread and wine by some kind of gesture, preferable by taking it as Jesus did.

Secondly, we must consider that Jesus said "do this". The words of institution must be part of the action. It says in the *Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration* article VII:

"However, this blessing, or the recitation of the Words of Institution of Christ alone does not make a Sacrament if the entire action of the Supper, as it was instituted by Christ, is not observed (as when the consecrated bread is not distributed, received, and partaken of, but is enclosed, sacrificed, or carried about), but the command of Christ, This do (which embraces the entire action or administration in this Sacrament, that in an assembly of Christians bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, drunk, and the Lord's death is shown forth at the same time) must be observed unseparated and inviolate, as also St. Paul places before our eyes the entire action of the breaking of bread or of distribution and reception, 1 Cor. 10:16." (.83-84)

If the one reciting the words does not take, consecrate and distribute, we have not done, what Jesus commands us to do, and the action is broken. Therefore, the consecration and the Sacrament as a whole becomes uncertain.

We therefore reject Online Communion on the grounds that the validity of the Sacrament is highly questionable since the Words of Institution in such a consecration do not have reference to the specific bread and wine, and because we are not doing what Jesus has commanded, and because the Words of Institution have been separated from the use or action of Holy Communion (i.e. the consecration has been separated from the act of distribution and reception).

2. Would it be permissible for a pastor to administer the Lord's Supper through the internet?

Since we have already rejected the validity of Online Communion, one could argue that we don't need to deal with the question whether it would be permissible if it was valid. Since it is argued that it is permissible, this provides reason for further clarification, and thus we will also deal with this issue.

In 1 Corinthians 10:17 we read: "*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*"

In 1 Corinthians 11:21 the Corinthians are criticized for not waiting for each other at the Lord's Supper.

Communion is therefore always a communal act of the church. That doesn't mean that a pastor can never commune someone privately. He is the publicly called servant of the church, so when he acts, the church acts. But precisely because he is the publicly called servant of God through the church, he is the one who should administer Communion.

Distributing Communion is also individual administration of the power of the keys, which Jesus commands the Apostles as the first ministers to exercise in John 20:21-23.

This text is interpreted in the *Augsburg Confession* article XXVIII: *Of Ecclesiastical Power*:

"Again, according to the Gospel or, as they say, by divine right, there belongs to the bishops as bishops, that is, to those to whom has been committed the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments, no jurisdiction except to forgive sins, to judge doctrine, to reject doctrines contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the Church wicked men, whose wickedness is known, and this without human force, simply by the Word." (21-22)

It is therefore the jurisdiction of pastors to forgive sins and to exclude from communion. Therefore, no one without a valid call should be allowed to do this, as it is taught by the *Augsburg Confession* article XIV: "*Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.*"

Because the pastor exercises the keys when administering the Lord's Supper he is also to make sure that only those who have been properly examined are admitted to communion as taught in the *Augsburg Confession* article XXV: "*Confession in the churches is not abolished among us; for it is not customary to give the body of the Lord, except to them that have been previously examined and absolved.*" (1)

Likewise he is only to commune those with whom he is in fellowship.

Since the pastor is not actually doing the distribution on the elements in Online Communion, he cannot exercise this authority and people whom he has not allowed to commune will be able to.

Now there might be cases of emergency for the administration of Baptism, since it is necessary for salvation (John 3:3,5). But since the Lord's Supper is not necessary for salvation, there are no cases of emergency, where one may administer the Sacrament without a proper call.

This matter was answered in the 1600s by the Orthodox Lutheran Fathers:

*Since a woman or some other common Christian is permitted to administer Baptism in case of an emergency, it would then follow that the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper can be administered by someone other than a preacher. Answer: There is a complete difference here, for Holy Baptism is the Sacrament of Initiation through which little children become members of Christ and heirs of eternal life. But the Lord's Supper is not such an absolutely necessary Sacrament to the extent that a person, in case of an emergency, could not be kept in faith to eternal life without it. (Johann Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, page 42) (1610AD)*

There is the apparent point of contention that not only the preachers, but also other Christians may administer the Holy Supper in case of emergency, in the same way that they are permitted to administer the Holy Baptism in case of an emergency. Answer: Concerning this concluding remark the issue was dealt with in the article on Holy Baptism in chapter 5, contention point 5, where it was shown that in this case there is a difference between the Sacrament of Holy Baptism and the Holy Lord's Supper. For what pertains to Holy Baptism, Christ speaks expressly and with great seriousness in John 3:5 "Unless then one is born out of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." However, the reception of the Holy Supper is not especially necessary for such entry into the Kingdom of God. Rather, where one cannot have access to an

ordained pastor, the spiritual reception of the Body and Blood of Christ is adequate for salvation if one cannot obtain the Sacramental reception. (Ibid. page 226)

In Online Communion, the pastor is merely doing the consecration. He is not administering the Sacrament. He does not distribute it and does not decide who is to receive it. Therefore, even if it was valid, it is not permissible for a pastor to consecrate elements that he is not distributing, since he is called not only to consecrate, but especially to administer the Sacraments.