
The Lutheran Reformation, the Lord's Supper, and Digital Worship

Martin J. Lohrmann

*Associate Professor of Lutheran Confessions and Heritage
Wartburg Theological Seminary
Dubuque, Iowa*

Introduction

As a Reformation historian, I feel confident about my ability to study and interpret what Lutherans of the 1500s thought about the issues facing them in their time and place. The tools of history, however, do not allow us to know what Luther or his colleagues would have thought about theological challenges facing the church five hundred years later. Specific to this paper, history cannot tell us what Martin Luther, his colleagues, or the diligent second-generation authors of the Formula of Concord would have thought about the relationship between Holy Communion and digitally mediated worship experiences that arose with the onset of the recent coronavirus pandemic.

Instead of asking what the sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers would say across the centuries, we can productively learn from the ways that they approached contextual challenges with theological integrity and pastoral care. In particular, the confessional Lutheran emphases on justification by faith, sacramental presence, open questions, and care for how worship reforms are implemented can serve as profound insights of the tradition that illumine our continuing path into holy communion.

In this paper I will not use Reformation history to give a yes or no answer to whether online distribution of Holy Communion should be practiced in Lutheran churches. Considering that it took decades and even centuries for the church to develop language about the Trinity and Christology and that controversies of the early Reformation were still being addressed in the later 1500s, it seems unrealistic and unnecessary to make firm decisions about potentially major new topics related to worship and technology. I will, however, propose guidelines for how such deliberations might take place in historically Lutheran ways.

I write as one whose own participation in worship during the isolation of the pandemic did not include taking communion in online settings. I was sad not to be in person with my congregation and seminary communities; not receiving the sacrament was part of that hard experience. More than missing Holy Communion, however, I found myself hungry for good preaching and thoughtful reflection about our difficult circumstances in light of God's word. At the same time, I am sympathetic to Lutheran parishioners who requested communion through online channels; there was a

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real hunger for the meal, a desire that can be acknowledged and appreciated. I especially support my colleagues in ministry who conscientiously navigated several concurrent theological, pastoral, medical, and social challenges—including whether to offer communion in online worship settings—with love, persistence, and grace. The following discussion, therefore, is meant to aid ongoing discernment about important matters of faith and worship as we move from the immediate crisis of the pandemic into longer term consideration of Holy Communion and online worship.

Sacramental theology and justification by faith

With the increase of online worship during the coronavirus pandemic that reached the United States in early 2020, new questions arose regarding the propriety of celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper via online technologies. Some communities, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,¹ did not endorse the reception of Holy Communion in online settings. On the other hand, some Protestant communi-

1. For a statement of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, see <https://files.lcms.org/file/preview/L0oL0cV5uASTJNIGuwcsQ2a3gh-7T7aF?>

ties that have historically emphasized the sacrament as a memorial meal, aid for faith, and sign of Christian unity transitioned into temporarily allowing for online communion services.² With a view of Christ's real presence that is similar to Catholicism and an openness in matters of faith and context shared with other main-line Protestants, members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America found themselves in a challenging middle ground.

Amid these debates, I was reminded of Martin Luther's meeting with the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529. As Zwingli argued against Christ's physical presence in the eucharistic elements on the basis of natural science, Luther replied, "I do not want to debate about mathematics."³ Here Luther's point was not to shut down reasonable discussion of scripture, science, or the sacraments but to let the logic of faith guide the conversation. In his notes of that meeting, the Strasbourg reformer Caspar Hedio reported that Luther "is not concerned about what is contrary to nature but only about what is contrary to faith."⁴

This brief episode in Reformation history has shaped my view of our recent eucharistic debates because it keeps the focus on faith in God and Christ for us. Without putting down the natural sciences or philosophy, Luther described physical and metaphysical details about Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper as being "mathematical" rather than theological. In the Lutheran tradition, Holy Communion is indeed supernatural: it is a divine promise, gift, and experience that truly unites believers with Christ.⁵ Luther's words at Marburg have reminded me that as much as we might want answers about the physics or metaphysics of Christ's sacramental presence in our new communication technologies, these "mathematical" considerations are secondary to our living relationship of trust in God.

In the Lutheran tradition, the doctrine of justification provides the foundation for considering even the most challenging worship topics. Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession says, "it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and

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righteousness and eternal life are given to us."⁶ In the Smalcald Articles, Martin Luther described this teaching and experience of receiving life, reconciliation, and salvation through faith alone as constituting "the first and chief article" of Christianity.⁷ While honoring Holy Communion as a profound means of grace, the doctrine of justification reminds us that we can have saving faith without the sacrament but we do not have grace-filled sacraments apart from faith in Christ.

However, far from suggesting that communion practices are insignificant compared to the doctrine of justification, Luther's very next section in the Smalcald Articles addressed the reform of late medieval eucharistic practices. Luther criticized the sacramental system of his time for obscuring rather than illuminating God's grace in Christ. While mostly discussing institutional abuses, Luther also said that people should not follow individualistic notions about how to administer the Lord's Supper. Supporting the communal nature of the sacrament, he wrote, "Thus it is not right (even if everything else were otherwise in order) to use the sacrament of the church for one's own devotional life and to play with it according to one's own pleasure apart from God's Word and outside the church community."⁸ This word against idiosyncratic uses of Holy Communion reminds us that we are dealing with a divine gift that comes from God and is stewarded by the wider church.

The Lord's Supper and open questions

Holy Communion is central to Christian faith and practice. As Deacon Kellie Lisi and I have written, in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper "the New Testament is edible."⁹ For Lutherans, Eucharist is more than a human tradition or culturally bound ritual. It is, in the words of Luther's Large Catechism, "the true body and blood of the LORD Christ, in and under the bread and wine, which we Christians are commanded by Christ's word to eat and drink."¹⁰ A similarly strong statement about this sacrament's

2. For a statement of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), see, <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2020/3/25/virtual-communion-church-leaders-say-it-can-be-don/>.

3. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff) [hereafter cited as LW] 38:32.

4. LW 32:29.

5. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 506.15: "We believe, teach, and confess that the body and blood of Christ are received not only spiritually through faith but also orally with the bread and wine, though not in a Capernaïtic fashion [i.e., crassly physical eating; cf. John 6:58] but rather in a supernatural, heavenly way because of the sacramental union of the elements."

6. BC 38 and 40.1-3 (article 4).

7. BC 301.1-5.

8. BC 303.9.

9. Kellie Lisi and Martin J. Lohrmann, *Never Leave Hungry: Imagination and Resources for Food and Faith* (forthcoming).

10. 467.8.

importance appears in the Augsburg Confession, which says, “it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.”¹¹

With its divine institution, Lutherans have long confessed that the sacrament of Holy Communion belongs at the heart of Christian faith, worship, and unity. Recognizing this theological and devotional significance allows us to understand why people have strong feelings about how we use the sacrament in our current contexts, including the online worship contexts that became especially familiar during the global coronavirus pandemic. People are right to care! There is a lot at stake regarding the topic of Eucharist and digital worship.

Holy Communion is not among the “human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings” that are subordinate to the means of grace as received through the church’s gospel ministries of word and sacrament. At the same time, the doctrine of justification allows Lutherans to make space for different views and practices to exist under that central teaching. Since the Reformation, Lutherans have called these open points of discussion “*adiaphora*,” a Greek word referring to “undifferentiated” matters of faith about which the Bible does not give a clear answer and that are not essential for salvation.¹²

While the Lord’s Supper itself does not belong to the category of *adiaphora*, it seems prudent to view current discussions about practices related to the celebration of Holy Communion and online worship as an open question. Of course, deciding whether or not a topic is negotiable or open can itself become a divisive point. Nevertheless, regarding this matter as one deserving honest discussion will help us move from the temporary measures of the pandemic to longer term wisdom about our views of the sacrament and modern technology.

Reforms and their implementation

Just as Luther’s distinction between “mathematical” and theological views of the sacrament led me to consider eucharistic practices in light of justification, so too has his concern for the ways in which reforms are put into practice informed my thinking. Already in the early years of the Reformation, Luther and his colleagues confronted challenges about how—and how fast—to conduct their reforms. In such situations, these church leaders showed that they not only cared about the content of their reforms but also thought about the ways in which reforms were communicated and impacted individual consciences and communal harmony.

For instance, in the sermon series he gave in March 1522 upon returning to Wittenberg from his exile at Wartburg Castle, Luther

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praised the town people’s good doctrine but condemned how they were applying this liberating theology in ways that brought conflict rather than healing to the community.¹³ After reviewing the need to confess sin and apply the gospel, Luther said, “Thirdly, we must also have love and through love we must do to one another as God has done to us through faith. For without love faith is nothing, as St. Paul says (1 Cor 2 [13:1])... And here, dear friends, have you not grievously failed? I see no signs of love among you, and I observe very well that you have not been grateful to God for such rich gifts and treasures.”¹⁴ Facing a conflicted community, Luther recognized that clarity about the gospel brings with it a pastoral sensitivity to focus on love of neighbors.

A similar awareness that not everyone would embrace change right away appears in Luther’s most direct reform of worship, “The German Mass and Order of Service.” Although worship in the local German language had been an early goal of the Reformation, Luther did not publish this German liturgy until 1526 when there had been more time to educate people about reforms and introduce the new service in a sustainable and orderly fashion. Knowing that real reform of hearts and communities takes time, he wrote in the preface to that liturgy: “while the exercise of this [gospel] freedom is up to everyone’s conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow Christians.”¹⁵

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11. BC 43.1-2 (article 7).

12. The clearest statement of the teaching about *adiaphora* appears in article 10 of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 635-640.

13. 51:70-83. For more, see Martin Lohrmann, “Another Quincentennial: Luther’s *Invocavit* Sermons (Lent 1522),” *Lutheran Quarterly* 35, 4 (Winter 2021), 444-454.

14. LW 51:71, amended for inclusive language.

15. LW 53:61, amended for inclusive language.

Conclusions

There was no internet in the sixteenth century. The first generations of Lutheran theologians did not have occasion for reflecting upon what it might or might not mean to affirm and experience Christ's real presence in Holy Communion in synchronous online worship settings. Regardless, the Lutheran tradition has imparted strong examples for how to have constructive conversations and make faithful decisions around new questions and practices about Eucharist and digital worship.

The Lord's Supper is a treasure of the church and a gift of God. As Luther's Small Catechism asserts, nothing less than "forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament."¹⁶ We have been right to care deeply about our use of Holy Communion in the recent pandemic and to ponder seriously how the Lord's Supper might or might not be part of online worship practices going forward. Guided by strengths of the Lutheran tradition like justification, the real presence, and care for how reforms are implemented, we have rich resources for moving forward in faith and love.

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16. BC 362.5-6.