

# A Safer Sacrament?

## Pastoral Cautions on Alterations to Eucharistic Practice in the Name of Health Fears

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### Introductory Observations

For those who may recognize themselves in some of the diagnoses in this paper, what is realized may be painful to concede. But know that the Lord is patient, merciful, and rejoices over us as we turn toward Him in reliance upon His Word (Luke 15:10). We live in somber times which call us to slow down and consider our path and the turns we have taken. Since around March 2020, we have seen Lutheran churches adapt in various ways to the reported spread of Covid-19 as a health consideration. But, let us be clear, the changes we have seen are also in reaction to news coverage as well as varied types of government response. “Adverse-reactions” in society are not only a result of a virus *per se*, but also both corporate and civil controls, lock-downs, economic reactions, and other opportunistic consolidations of dominance. While we will not get into the intentions of those in seats of power, whether legitimate authority or by manipulating influence, clearly in many cases, personal health has not been the only objective.

Through various means, the public mindset has been taken over by fear and the desire to be in control. The early video reporting out of Wuhan, showing people dropping dead on the streets, was later shown to be contrived to evoke global public terror. The 2020 hat trick of virus fears, economic turmoil, and televised riots in many areas, have conspired to hijack the fear-centers of our brains. This much is clear: until recently, our culture had been largely able to keep human mortality consciousness at arm’s length, but we have not been so adept in the post-2020 environment. That calamity has been exploited by some in decision-making positions.<sup>1</sup> Even with the cyber-escapism of the “Metaverse,” mortality still lingers in the corner. Many have come to realize modern civilization is much more brittle than we previously assumed. As we respond to this confluence of crises as confessional Lutherans, we have great concern to nurture dependence upon Christ. We also have the pledged duty of Scriptural and Confessional fidelity (see footnote below).<sup>2</sup> We want to remain steadfast in the storm, for ourselves and as a witness to others. Jesus is with us in the boat!

For some time, social observers, exemplified in Ernest Becker’s 1973 book *The Denial of Death*, have diagnosed that western societies have been forming culture in psychological denial of death, seeking to compartmentalize it from daily life in various ways. And yet, as Neil Postman illustrates in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, we are entertaining and distracting ourselves into a Huxleyan culture of death and technocracy. Life and death are now treated as commodities. “Unproductive” people are just regarded in that scheme as “useless eaters.” Now, we have global environmental mythologies to give quasi-religious gravitas to the commoditization of human life. Our new “priest-class” in lab coats have endless new pronouncements of when the world will end if we do not go along with a reset of society and the economy, and cancel the nay-sayers, shunned as heretics. The neo-feudalistic *Brave New World* of Huxley, in many localities, is being

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<sup>1</sup> The recognition of exploitation of fear raised questions about various forms of propaganda and psycho-social manipulation. Social media saw censorship over references to the methods of social control, for instance, the Milgrim Experiments, Stockholm Syndrome, “amygdala hijacking,” and Mass Formation Psychosis. I’ll leave the accuracy of those suggestions up to your own research. These are not directly germane to the theological matters of sacramental theology in this essay. But think-tanks, research institutes, and departments of higher education have long developed various psycho-social influence techniques, many of which have application in military, political, and marketing strategies.

<sup>2</sup> In our Lutheran rite of clergy installation, and when a pastor is ordained, the following vow is included:

“P: Do you promise that you will perform the duties of your office in accordance with these Confessions, and that all of your preaching and teaching and your administration of the Sacraments will be in conformity with Holy Scripture and with these Confessions? R: I Promise, with the help of God. The congregation later in the rite then pledges to uphold the pastor in this work. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006. *Lutheran Service Book Agenda*. “Installation of a Pastor,” pp.174-184.)

enforced with police state measures that surpass even Orwell's *1984*. We will see if the scientific principle is true in this case: every action has an equal and opposite reaction. Interventionism in various political modalities often brings blowback.

The strange cultural soup of the denial of death mixed with a demonic culture of death is seen in youth-obsessive culture, modern funeral practices and their jargon, abortion on demand, gory video games, assisted suicide, just to name a few of its leading economic indicators. It reminds Christians that since Christ's death and resurrection, we are indeed living in the end times (note inaugurated eschatology of Hebrews 1:1-4). The devil is on the prowl and so we need to be vigilant. And here we are in the ark of the Church, afloat upon the seas of these global controversies talking about the liturgy and Holy Communion. Yet, despite what the political class would have us assume, attention to the details of these churchly matters are of ultimate importance for the church under the cross. Dr. John Stephenson writes in his *Eschatology* volume:

Just as world history is in large measure a history of warfare, even so church history is chiefly a record of the rise and refutation of false doctrine within holy Christendom. Since Satan is not yet cast into the lake of fire, the church militant can know not a single hour undisturbed by doctrinal dissension. The Word must be contended over as well as confessed (1 Cor. 11:19). Doctor Luther bluntly reminds us that "dissension and contention over the Scriptures...is a divine quarrel wherein God contends with the devil...Eph.6:12."<sup>3</sup>

Christian theology confesses universal human mortality as the chief human predicament resulting from Adamic sin and unbelief. Biblically, death is not natural to God's perfect creation. That in Christ we have the solution to it is the core fact of the faith. Easter means the defeat of death is for real – we have passed over from death to life in Christ. Salvation understood rightly is about both body and soul. The Lord's Day gathering, in celebration of Christ's bodily resurrection, is about receiving forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation through His prescribed means. Therefore, any alterations to the life-bestowing Word and Sacraments, as such, deserves and obliges responsible consideration, especially because our confession is that they actually deliver resurrection from spiritual and physical death. Since the spoken and sacramental gospel are given by Christ as medicine unto eternal life, deviations from His institution protocol are not without potentially grave consequences.

An important question, then, is this: If they give eternal life in body and soul, why must they be changed with the purpose of making them "safer"? God is not merely the "passenger" in a ceremony or a static observer in a corner of the room. Honoring His mandate as He gave it, we also have His promise of blessing. He is active in this giving. And the church has duty of care for the integrity of this medicine. In the state where I reside, a pharmacist was given stringent civil penalties for watering down the dosage of a vaccine. The Eucharist is the far greater antidote. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Let us remember before whom we stand. Think not only of those in white lab coats and their vacillating opinions, but the host arrayed in white before the throne of the Lamb, who have come out of the great tribulation. What is the risk to us in treating this sacrament as if it belongs to us? Perhaps we forget God is in the room when we have these discussions about modifications to His Supper? The Lord had far better than 20/20 vision about 2020.

Properly, Christians know that fear, and the fear of death, should not be the principle that shapes how we worship or commune. But sadly, this may not be presumed in these days of poor catechesis and where theology is an afterthought. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, but we should not fear those who can only kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Yet, just surveying a random number of Lutheran congregational web pages will make clear that there has not been a consistent, coherent, or always

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<sup>3</sup> John R. Stephenson. *Eschatology: Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics (Volume XIII)*. (Dearborn, MI: The Luther Academy, 1993); p.74

theologically well-considered strategy for this pandemic. Our minds must be quieted by the comfort of the Gospel before we are really ready to approach the issue at hand. The relentless fear-factory of tv news, illustrated by endless NFL-style “scoreboards” of cases, hospitalizations, vaccinations, etc., only engineers consent for more technocratic changes to society that often have little to do with the health of the individual, despite their marketing.

Our grasp of the faith is constantly challenged in direct proportion to how many hours we spend watching television or taking in internet news, which becomes a kind of “counter-catechesis” to the hour or two at church on an average week even for regular church-goers. I do not mean to say that some individuals do not suffer more severe or dangerous cases of viral infection (especially with pre-existing comorbidities). But when civil coercion is enacted that goes too far, the church must recognize its duty of resistance (not rebellion) under the local or “lesser” magistrates, and learn how to stand on the Word of God when Caesar oversteps his proper domain. When the external powers demand, beyond their proper bounds, modification of what is given from the Lord to the authority of the Church, we confess in our Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration, Article X) the churchly response to tyranny is resistance while carrying our cross (see quote in footnote below).<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I will be primarily considering alterations to eucharistic (Communion) practice and their ramifications. Unavoidably, our topic will traverse the intersection of faith and science (or “scientism”). In some local contexts, the area of resistance to civil tyranny by the church might be applicable but it cannot be taken up in this essay. In that regard I encourage study of the Reformation era history of the Magdeburg Confession of 1550 and the Lutheran understanding of civil resistance.<sup>5</sup> In the course of this essay I cannot provide a comprehensive review of all matters, but I will attempt to provide some pastoral theological observations which are consistent with our confession of the faith, especially pertaining to a congregation’s liturgical life and sacramental practice.

### **MAY WE OR CAN WE MAKE COMMUNION “SAFER” THAN HOW THE LORD GAVE IT TO US?**

Already decades ago in less intense circumstances “individual cups” have become the assumed norm not only in Protestant churches of Calvinist or Zwinglian heritage, which do not confess the bodily presence of Christ in the elements, but also in Lutheran churches. No uniformity of churchly review or approval was exhibited in

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<sup>4</sup> We believe, teach, and confess also that at the time of confession [when a confession of the heavenly truth is required], when the enemies of God's Word desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire congregation of God, yea, every Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word, as the leaders of the congregation of God [as those whom God has appointed to rule His Church], are bound by God's Word to confess freely and openly the [godly] doctrine, and what belongs to the whole of [pure] religion, not only in words, but also in works and with deeds; and that then, in this case, even in such [things truly and of themselves] adiaphora, they must not yield to the adversaries, or permit these [adiaphora] to be forced upon them by their enemies, whether by violence or cunning, to the detriment of the true worship of God and the introduction and sanction of idolatry. 11] For it is written, Gal. 5:1: Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not again entangled in the yoke of bondage. Also Gal. 2:4f : And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage; to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the Gospel might continue with you. 12] [Now it is manifest that in that place Paul speaks concerning circumcision, which at that time had become an adiaphoron (1 Cor. 7:18f.), and which at other occasions was observed by Paul (however, with Christian and spiritual freedom, Acts 16:3). But when the false apostles urged circumcision for establishing their false doctrine, (that the works of the Law were necessary for righteousness and salvation,) and misused it for confirming their error in the minds of men, Paul says that he would not yield even for an hour, in order that the truth of the Gospel might continue unimpaired.] (*The Book of Concord, Formula of Concord-Solid Declaration, Article X, excerpted*)

<sup>5</sup> Romans 13 does not entail *absolute* or *unconditional* obedience. All authority in this world has given parameters. Also, as Jesus told Pontius Pilate, “You would have no authority at all if it were not given you from above.” When civil authority steps outside its proper bounds and even requires or condemns what is godly, we are duty-bound to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29).

the way individual cups were introduced or considered theologically. Their introduction was piecemeal - church supply catalogs started selling them, memorial donations were received and used (not wanting to offend donors), minimally instructed Lutherans saw their Methodist church neighbors using them and then asked, "why can't we use them too?" and so forth. Theological review was mostly done after the fact. How objective would that analysis really be when such a thing was already increasingly common (i.e., "make people happy now, ask questions later")?

In the approach to these questions, the temptation is to discuss Communion as a thing or object over which we are making decisions, not as an encounter with the Holy Son of God in the flesh. There is more to it than the crass discussion of "what would still work." Speculation about solutions driven by fear was the *modus operandi* rather than careful biblical consideration. Doctrinal themes or aphorisms are referenced, but not close examination of biblical texts in context. The sacrament is a divine mystery revealed to us. It is foreshadowed typologically in Isaiah 6 as the hot coal taken by the Seraph with tongs from the LORD's altar to purge the unclean lips of the prophet Isaiah, after he is struck by his own sin in the presence of the enthroned King, the Most High God (see Isaiah 6:1-7). In that light, remembering what is present but hidden from our eyes, perhaps questions of Communion "safety" would center more on repentance, reverence, thorough catechesis in the faith, unity with the apostolic faith, charity toward the neighbor in daily life, and humility. As it is said of Aslan, the lion symbolic of God in C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, he is not safe, but he is good. Approach accordingly. Old Testament ceremonial law was an ongoing school in this very fact.

Hindsight of decades in this relatively new practice (compared to the prior 1900 years or so) suggests that small alterations in practice are magnified over time, the implications being exposed due to further pressures upon the weak spots. These weaknesses expose fractures that may well be widening. **PLEASE NOTE: Let me be clear, lest someone misunderstand me of saying otherwise: Individual cups in the Lord's Supper certainly do not invalidate the sacrament or nullify the bodily presence of Christ. There are pastoral reasons and cases where it may be advisable to use them where actual personal needs arise (not merely preferences), though they are likely not needed as the general practice for the entire congregation, despite modern expectations.** The chalice should remain available and pastorally encouraged with teaching. With regard to individual cups, I simply mean to take a step back and reflect on their resulting ramifications now that they have been with us some decades. There are lots of questions that could be asked. What other assumptions or troubles have emerged due to their somewhat haphazard introduction decades ago? How have they affected our perceptions of receiving the Lord's Supper and what it means to be a body of members united in Christ? I would encourage the reader to contemplate these questions and others judiciously and honestly. Changes from decades ago affect us now. Liturgical changes have consequences, some more serious than others. Remember the old worship aphorism – *lex orandi, lex credendi*? The rule of how we pray or worship is the rule of what we believe. In other words, the way of liturgy and ceremonies influences and shapes what you believe. Liturgy itself is not an indifferent matter, though some *humanly devised* ceremonies may be when all things are equal (they are, in German, "*mitteldinge*" – in between things).

Among Lutherans in North America, but not necessarily other countries, to varying degrees, congregations have adopted not only individual glasses, but also disposable plastic cups. (We don't have time here to juxtapose the thesis of Marshall McLuhan, "The medium is the message.") The utilitarian thought, "it is only the container," was, for many, the practical end of the discussion. But this has not led to better teaching or practice over time. I have seen, more than once, a kind of basketball "free throw shot" done when a communicant was returning to his pew, tossing a mostly-empty disposable cup into a trash can in front of the first row of pews. These sorts of changes tend to have an inertia to them. One change might just lead to another. In modern America we often prize being casual or informal so that everyone is pajamas comfortable, but we must also ask, "Is nothing sacred anymore?" We can easily forget that in the Divine

Service we approach the same God Moses met at the burning bush (see also Hebrews 12:22-29). We approach the throne of the Lord among “angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven” and join in their eternal *Sanctus* canticle.

Does the “body language” (visual communication) of throw away plastic cups communicate or obscure a belief in the bodily presence of Christ? Would an inquisitive visitor assume throw away cups indicated belief in the real presence or a Zwinglian symbolic understanding? Is the use of disposable cups really as neutral as we might think? If Lutherans can use them, even on a limited basis, would it necessitate preventative teaching to guard against erosion of our beliefs. For this reason, many congregations that had previously adopted disposable cups have made the move back to glass individual cups. I have pastorally moved altar guild practice this way in times past. Centuries ago it was prescribed in Lutheran church manuals to have two altar assistants hold a cloth under the hands of the pastor as he distributed the host (the body of Christ), so as to catch any potential crumbs or fragments that might fall. One can also read dramatic accounts of Martin Luther’s reverent response to spills from the chalice. As prescribed officially in many historic Lutheran *kirchenordnungen*, anything that remains of leftover consecrated bread or wine is to be consumed by designated communicants, to fulfill the “eat” and “drink” imperative of the institution.

How contrasting are these classic Lutheran practices to 21<sup>st</sup> century use of disposable cups to distribute the holy blood of Christ? Were the Lutherans of old too religious, pious, legalistic, or superstitious, or have we drifted a bit perhaps? As God established in the law of Moses: distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean (Leviticus 10:10). We should be on our guard with the holy things of God. As the cliché goes, “familiarity breeds contempt.” Remember how Jesus was treated when He preached in Nazareth amongst relatives and old neighbors. But take note if these things hit home. If we have need to pause and perhaps backtrack a bit, know that the Lord is gracious and merciful. Let us restore the old perspective that has always been there in the attic of our church. The Augsburg Confession, in Article XXIV, describes the important intent of the Lutheran church in ceremonies:

Falsely are our [Lutheran] churches accused of abolishing the Mass; for the Mass is retained among 2] us, and celebrated with the highest reverence. Nearly all the usual ceremonies are also preserved, save that the parts sung in Latin are interspersed here and there with German hymns, which have been added 3] to teach the people. For ceremonies are needed to this end alone that the unlearned 4] be taught [what they need to know of Christ]. And not only has Paul commanded to use in the church a language understood by the people 1 Cor. 14:2-9, but it has also been so ordained by man's law. 5] The people are accustomed to partake of the Sacrament together, if any be fit for it, and this also increases the reverence and devotion of public 6] worship. For none are admitted 7] except they be first examined. The people are also advised concerning the dignity and use of the Sacrament, how great consolation it brings anxious consciences, that they may learn to believe God, and to expect and ask of Him all that is good. 8] [In this connection they are also instructed regarding other and false teachings on the Sacrament.] This worship pleases God; such use of the Sacrament nourishes true devotion 9] toward God. It does not, therefore, appear that the Mass is more devoutly celebrated among our [Roman] adversaries than among us.

Notice a few things in this excerpt from the Augsburg Confession. Our confession makes clear that they celebrate the Mass, or we would say, the Divine Service, with at least as great, if not greater reverence than the Roman Catholic Church of that day. Also, they retained the customary historic ceremonies, by and large, except where a contradiction of Scripture would require a reform. There is a catechetical and reverential purpose to ceremonies. And they are accustomed to partake of the sacrament together, not separately. And the way the Supper is conducted is to increase understanding and to increase reverence with public devotion. Additionally, “none are admitted except they be first examined.” The pastor needs to be like a pharmacist in that regard. In the Augsburg Confession, all this is done in the context of being advised, instructed, and encouraged regarding the dignity and use of the Sacrament and its comfort. They also seek

to warn against false understandings of the Supper (which in larger context especially means both Roman Catholic and various protestant errors).

Consider another point for our day. The move toward separate cups for everyone may foster an atomized view of being an isolated Christian free agent, as it were. It is not uncommon in our day of “buffet style” religion that some Christians just construct their own creed and practices at home— even before the pandemic (see 2 Peter 1:20-21).<sup>6</sup> Individualism (“it’s just about me and Jesus”), people requesting “customized” sacraments for individual felt needs, and a move away from the shared reception of the same gift, are just mentioned here to name a few consequences of run-away individualism in the church.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, changes often do not remain isolated changes. When the assumptions are just there in the cultural atmosphere we often don’t realize when we have taken them on for ourselves, and in turn, they take on a life of their own.

I also want to make this observation: in the starting point to these questions we are running the thought process backwards. The starting point is not our potential modifications. But if we start, as Luther does in the Small Catechism, with “What is the Sacrament of the Altar?” and then go forward from there, we approach the question on God’s terms. The starting point is not, “What can we change and not invalidate the sacrament?” This is the sacramental equivalent of, “You have a need and I can develop a creed.” But trying to figure out what we can change makes big assumptions. Luther’s starting point in the Catechisms is to always go back to the instituting words of Christ in the synoptic Gospels and 1 Corinthians 11.

When humans attempt to make the sacrament “safer,” the underlying assumption is that the sacrament as the church has received it historically, and as it is established in the institution accounts, is somehow now, inadequate, unsafe, not modernly-nuanced enough, for our 21<sup>st</sup> century understandings of germ theory, disease, virology, etc. It doesn’t help, either, if the government erroneously thinks it somehow has jurisdiction over what goes on at the altar and becomes confrontational with the church. Though they were seen in even earlier decades, many LCMS churches began using individual cups in the 1980s during the AIDS/HIV scare. Fear was then in the driver’s seat. The tv and radio news networks helped push the fear narrative, and behold, change was in the air in the church. As many cry out now for the church to adapt to the fears of the times, are we forgetting that the Lord Jesus Christ is with us in the boat and that His Word stills the storm? He is Lord over creation. Perhaps it is not simply a virus but fear which has been weaponized and even institutionalized. Which is the proper fear in this setting – the possible presence of a biological entity with a generally high recovery rate, or the holy one of Israel, the eternal Son of the Most High God, who has become flesh? While acknowledging that we are defiled creatures on holy ground coming before the Most High God, we are comforted in the truth of Psalm 23:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me;  
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my  
enemies....

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<sup>6</sup> “...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21).

<sup>7</sup> As an aside, we might also mention that originally the trays which carry individual cups were designed to be passed down the pew in congregations that practiced open communion in the context of a symbolic understanding of Communion, as an ordinance, in protestant terminology. In practice they certainly can be awkward when used at the rail and not always easy for the suffering arthritic or person with hand tremors, especially if cups are stuck in the holes. Oftentimes, with those circumstances, I have seen communicants move back to communing via the chalice. In that light, sometimes a communicant will realize they might have been communing that way all along. I have even seen recovering alcoholics move successfully back to communing from the chalice without issues, because they knew, “the Lord won’t let this hurt me.”

What presuppositions undergird the various changes, perhaps unwittingly so? Is the intuited thought that if the Lord had known 21<sup>st</sup> century germ theory or virology He would have instituted the Holy Supper of His body and blood otherwise, or at least indicated other options or modifications? Or is the implication that since the Lord didn't indicate emergency options, that we are free to do, in our view, whatever works in the moment, or makes people feel in control? An informed Christian would have to ask, "What view of Christ and His two natures do the suppositions infer?" If it suggests in Christ a lack of knowledge or wisdom or adequacy, that untruth leads to various other theological problems, not fewer problems. If the supposition suggests an inactivity, absence, or indifference of Christ, this is theological quicksand. Wiggling around in those thoughts sinks quickly into rank heresy.

When these suppositions ultimately question not just the adequacy of the received churchly practice of the Lord's Supper, but the person of Christ, a pastor needs to be a spiritual father who proclaims the present, active, and reigning Christ. In preaching and teaching, a spiritual father needs to bolster the congregation's confidence in Christ's promises, His rock-solid institution, and His gracious presence working for our blessing. The devil lurks around ready to exploit our doubts and hammer a steel wedge into those theological fissures to put asunder what God joined together. And thereby Satan would rob us of Gospel comfort and certainty in God's Word (see Matthew 13:18-23). Despite the storms around us, we should step very slowly through the Bible into these contemplated changes. The Holy Spirit works through the Scriptures, not in mystical detours around them. Consider that the Lord is there with us as we contemplate these matters carefully.

Be skeptical about the human assumptions. What Christian would really want to say that we care about people better than the God who gave us the Scriptures and Supper as He did? God is love, but we cannot out-love or best the Triune God in compassion. He loves you and your neighbor better, more thoroughly, deeply, and effectively than you. The same Lord who healed many, raised the dead, cast out demons, and will raise us up on the Last Day, knows about death, disease, fear, persecution, government, and nonetheless gave us this, His last will and testament, on the night in which He was betrayed into death, to save us from temporal and eternal death. He overlooks nothing in this. He was not surprised by the events of 2020. We should humbly meditate on His words in Isaiah (55:8-9):

*"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord.  
"For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways,  
And My thoughts than your thoughts.*

Those modernistic assumptions are indicative of the philosophy of so-called "progress" – the myth that humanity is always progressing and improving and that the ancients knew nothing and were less wise or virtuous. That is the kind of talk from politicians and so-called elites who want to determine who is "on the right side of history." But what worldview determines which is the "right side" of history? Jesus told us that "as it was in the days of Noah" before the flood, so it will be in the world when He comes again in glory. Does that forecast real human moral progress? At the Tower of Babel arrogant humanity collaborated for great "creative" evil and God thwarted them. Christians believe that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega of history and that of His kingdom there will be no end. We proclaim the changeless faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). The Word of the Lord endures forever. Of Christ, we confess in the Small Catechism, Jesus is "true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary." The assumption that there is something insufficient about the Lord's Supper now, because there was some critical lack of scientific knowledge in the times in which Jesus lived, is wrong, whether we realize our inner contradictions consciously or not. Received with faith in His Word, the Lord's gifts will not harm us. As an old Lutheran hymn proclaims the goodness of the Lord poetically:

*What God ordains is always good.  
His loving thought attends me;  
No poison can be in the cup  
That my Physician sends me.  
My God is true; Each morning new  
I trust His grace unending,  
My life to Him commending  
(TLH 521:3; LSB 760:3)*

Though the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10), fear of mortality or fear of suffering with an illness cannot be the starting point for eucharistic teaching or practice, or Christian theology in general. The Lord has preserved His Church through more terrible plagues than what we see today, as well as wars, famines, economic crashes, migration to new lands, etc. The gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. But daily we must learn anew that suffering and genuine confession of the faith go together (read Matthew 16). Taking up the cross and following Jesus gives comfort but is often not comfortable. We walk by faith and not by sight (which means it will not always be so agreeable with our thoughts or feelings). We have need to continually hear that our sufferings are not punishments since Christ already endured all for us. Christ drank the cup of suffering and God's wrath against sin but we are given the cup of blessing and life.

While it is tempting to look to other authorities, Holy Communion has no other source or foundation than the Word of God (*sola Scriptura*) and specifically its institution accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 1 Corinthians (then with supporting passages). The church and her pastors are given to be stewards of God's mysteries. No congregational vote, pastoral discretion, or synodical official overrules the Word of God or the institution of Christ on the night in which He was betrayed.

When St. Paul dealt with the church in Corinth (first epistle) in terms of crass malpractice in the observance Holy Communion there, with porous fellowship practice, the Apostle acknowledges that even he himself is not free to modify the sacrament of Christ's body and blood: "That which I received from the Lord, I also delivered unto you..." (1 Corinthians 11). He does not have any secret knowledge or authority to make changes to it. The Supper is miracle of Christ but certainly not an occult object over which Paul has magical powers. He is a steward but not an engineer of the mysteries. The only "pastoral discretion" is to administer it faithfully within the way Christ gave it. Call and ordination are not license to change what belongs to God, but just the opposite (see 1 Corinthians 4). The Lord's Supper is the "solid food" of faith and not "spiritual milk," as we appreciate in confirmation practices.

It is notable that, in 1 Corinthians 11, the only time the Scriptures speak of someone becoming ill in connection with the Lord's Supper, is when there are those who did not discern the body of Christ – in other words, they denied the actual presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper. Some became sick and some even died. It was not about good modern hygiene issues. The Lord's Supper is about blessing for soul and body. Luther, as with some early church fathers, also recognized that there is a bodily benefit of receiving the Lord's body and blood. He recognized that where the soul is benefitted the body benefits also. Human beings are a unity of body, soul, and mind. That is how God made us in His image. We recall the preaching of Jesus in John 6, in His Bread of Life sermon:

*52 The Jews therefore quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?" 53 Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. 54 Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. 55 For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. 56 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. 57 As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he*

*who feeds on Me will live because of Me. 58 This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”*

In the Catechism we take to heart, “where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation.” We recognize this truth by faith. But where fear prevails, that worry and desire to control circumstances eclipses trust in the promises and gracious presence of Christ in the Supper. Does this mean that as Christians we deny the reality of illness or suffering? No, just the opposite. We do not deny illness or suffering but we believe that in Christ we have the answer for them and they are taken up by Him (Isaiah 53:3-6). Jesus is the Savior not only from sin but also from death. And we believe that even though we die yet shall we live. In the remainder of this essay, we’ll turn to a few practice issues that have arisen in reaction to the pandemic in some Lutheran churches. Sometimes, the various congregational responses to the pandemic reaction in society have revealed subterranean fractures previously concealed below where we had gaps in covering the whole counsel of God in our teaching. These further fractured in church life with increased pressures upon the weak points in these times of crisis. Therefore, now is a good time to shore up the foundation, fill in the gaps, and go back to the sources as we examine ourselves, trusting in the Lord’s compassion toward us in Jesus. We should not be ashamed or fearful to constructively inspect our houses and be restored by grace.



### **SPECIFIC QUESTIONS: Hermetically-Sealed Bread and Wine and Their Related Practices**

What am I talking about? This is an item sold by Northwestern Publishing House (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod supplier) and perhaps by others. It is a sealed cup of wine with a small wafer sealed into the bottom of the cup. They are sealed in with something like what you might find on a pill bottle safety seal or a coffee creamer single serving liquid. Maybe this is simplistic, but does the fact alone that the WELS church supplier, Northwestern Publishing House, sells this item, and WELS is “conservative Lutheran” synod settle the question at hand on its propriety and use? No, it doesn’t. Merely sourcing our items, solutions, and mimicking other “conservative Lutherans” doesn’t let us off the hook

to examine things more closely and patiently. *Ad hoc* decisions in times of panic or high adrenaline, are not often going to lead to good long-term church practices or sound precedents for the church. The longer such a humanly-devised fix remains, the fallen conscience will be tempted to justify itself and the ongoing use of problematic practices on dubious unbiblical grounds. In such speculative circumstances trust in the mercy of Christ is sabotaged by the temptation to self-justification while indulgent forms of humanly-defined love are the often-convincing counterfeit of divine love, a properly observed sacrament.

A hermetically-sealed individual cup held by a communicant (or possibly a non-communicant who took one anyway) and then communing one’s self in isolation is separating what the Lord has joined together in the institution accounts. There is both an order and an authority set forth in this gift from Christ. We receive from the Lord that which ministers, with authority from Him, deliver to the faithful baptized gathered for the Divine Service. We understand that the Lord’s Supper is something not only that He gave back then (past tense), but that He gives now where two or three are gathered in His name and honor the “this do” of His mandate. He is present with us not only in the bread and wine but also as the One distributing this gift (“he who hears you, hears Me,” Jesus says of His ministers). Ministers are His ambassadors and representatives – the twelve being the ones at table with Jesus in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday. In a 1533 treatise, Luther said it so emphatically:

For we must believe and be sure of this, that baptism does not belong to us but to Christ, that the gospel does not belong to us but to Christ, that the office of preaching does not belong to us but to Christ, that the sacrament (of the Lord's Supper) does not belong to us but to Christ, that the keys, or forgiveness and retention of sins, do not belong to us but to Christ. In summary, the offices and sacraments do not belong to us but to Christ, for he has ordained all this and left it behind as a legacy in the church to be exercised and used to the end of the world; and he does not lie or deceive us. Therefore, we cannot make anything else out of it but must act according to his command and hold to it. However, if we alter it or improve on it, then it is invalid and Christ is no longer present, nor his ordinance.<sup>8</sup>

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession also makes this clear in Article XXIV in succinct form:

But let us speak of the word *liturgy*. 80] This word does not properly signify a sacrifice, but rather the public ministry, and agrees aptly with our belief, namely, that one minister who consecrates tenders the body and blood of the Lord to the rest of the people, just as one minister who preaches tenders the Gospel to the people, as Paul says, 1 Cor. 4:1: Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, i.e., of the Gospel and the Sacraments. And 2 Cor. 5:20: We are ambassadors for Christ, as 81] though God did beseech you by us; we pray you in Christ's stead, Be ye reconciled to God. Thus the term *leitourgia* agrees aptly with the ministry.

The liturgy, the public ministry (the pastoral office), and the distribution of the Lord's Supper from the Lord to the communicants are all divinely designated order that the man in the office carries out. If a man is provided by the church to assist with this, he does it as an extension of the pastor, as an assistant to the office. This order is ultimately a divine action through the means of the office speaking and handing out. Hidden in all this, Christ is really the One speaking and doing in the Eucharist. In the institution accounts the Lord takes [λαβὼν] the bread and the cup to Himself first before giving it to the disciples who are gathered at table with Him in the Upper Room. This is similar to the feeding of the 5,000 plus. There is a movement of the bread and fish to Jesus first, before the giving to the people as the miracle. There is an order to this: taking bread, giving thanks, and giving with the words. Those receiving "take" only after it is given with Christ's words. Are we to decide that order doesn't matter or is a secondary matter? We don't institute sacraments, how would we know?

The pre-distribution of hermetically sealed bread and wine deviates from the instituted order to something outside indicated order as given in Jesus' "this do in remembrance of Me" command. Ostensibly, the purpose of a bread and wine product being hermetically-sealed is to make it safer so that no one else but the individual communicant handles the actual bread and wine before they are consumed in isolation. But note this rather harsh friction against the meaning of the Lord's Supper for the Church. This sacrament is a meal not only of the individual Christians with Jesus on the vertical level, so to speak, but also a sharing of that fellowship horizontally as the body and Bride of Christ, members who are not separate from one another. In the early church, as a sign of reconciliation, those present who were baptized and instructed, living in repentance, exchanged a "kiss of peace," not merely as a "hello" greeting but to exemplify mutual forgiveness in Christ (no grudges!) and ultimate unity. It begs the question how a hermetically-sealed bread and wine that are "pre-distributed" (before consecration) fits with or helps teach any of those points. Does it also help further what we assert about Lutheran churches holding the Divine Service of Holy Communion in greater reverence (as we read in Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV earlier) than even the Roman Church? If we aren't careful and slow down, we can reduce receiving this holy gift to the level of hastily popping down a pill. Approaching the sacrament is approaching the Lord's rebuilt Temple, made without hands, for He was raised in His true body the third day in exaltation. Let us ponder the words of Psalm 116:12-15:

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<sup>8</sup> "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests" (*Luther's Works*, AE:38; p.200).

*What shall I render to the Lord  
For all His benefits toward me?  
I will take up the cup of salvation,  
And call upon the name of the Lord.  
I will pay my vows to the Lord  
Now in the presence of all His people.  
Precious in the sight of the Lord  
Is the death of His saints.*

The minimalized consideration of whether the Word of consecration is present in the same room somehow with pre-distributed bread and wine, replaces the account of the institution itself with boiled-down dogmatic formulae at best. Helpful theological aphorisms on the power of the Word (Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 1:16), or the Word coming to the element and it becomes a sacrament (*accedat verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*) are fine for what they cover and emphasize, but they are not the entire necessary consideration. Just as the Reformation “*solas*” (e.g. “*sola fide*”) are not complete sentences, so there is much more to say for understanding. We follow Scripture not just theological intuition. Lest we think we can say a prayer to put a stamp of approval on unbiblical changes, we should remember the Holy Spirit works through the Word not separated from the Word.<sup>9</sup>

The observance of the Eucharist is not simply broadcasting the *Verba Testamenti* at bread and wine held by church members dislocated somewhere, but the local gathered assembly, who even themselves support that clergy stewardship keeping the divine imperative “this do in remembrance of Me.” The Lord intends the sacraments to be personally held between people given the responsibility of giving and receiving, that is locally interactive, relational, with proximity in a particular context and order. Are there risks in that? Maybe or maybe not, but that’s how it is divinely given for our blessing. But trust the goodness and guardianship of Jesus in it. He does not mean to harm you by it in any way, but rather give life. Every other food we eat is transformed by us, yet this heavenly food transforms us. We have a foretaste of the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom. Martin Luther once said that we learn to go to the Lord’s Supper like we are going to our death, so that when we go to our death it is like we are going to the Lord’s Supper. Like we sing with old Simeon in the *Nunc Dimittis*, having beheld the faithful Lord Jesus who kept His promises, we can depart this life in peace according to the Lord’s Word (see Luke 2:25-35). We rejoice in that at the end of the Divine Service after we receive the body and blood of Christ Himself. As often as we partake of this gift we then are sent forth as witnesses into the world to proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.

The Gospel gifts come from outside of you via an external Word that does and gives what it says. God designated the hand that is given the handing out to do for you after it has been blessed by the Word of Christ. Then, to paraphrase the catechism, we can be sure that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, following Christ’s “this do” command, this is just as valid and certain, even in

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<sup>9</sup> Luther strongly critiques the charismatics of his day in the *Smalcald Articles*: And in those things which concern the spoken, outward Word, we must firmly hold that God grants His Spirit or grace to no one, except through or with the preceding outward Word, in order that we may [thus] be protected against the enthusiasts, *i.e.*, spirits who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, and accordingly judge Scripture or the spoken Word, and explain and stretch it at their pleasure, as Muenzer did, and many still do at the present day, who wish to be acute judges between the Spirit and the letter, and yet know not what they say or declare. [41](#) For [indeed] the Papacy also is nothing but sheer enthusiasm, by which the Pope boasts that all rights exist in the shrine of his heart, and whatever he decides and commands with [in] his church is spirit and right, even though it is above and contrary to Scripture and the spoken Word. [51](#) All this is the old devil and old serpent, who also converted Adam and Eve into enthusiasts, and led them from the outward Word of God to spiritualizing and self-conceit, and nevertheless he accomplished this through other outward words [*The Book of Concord, Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII*]

heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself. For it is Christ there among as the One who serves (*der Hauptgottesdienst – the chief Divine Service*). Therefore, may we not regard the sacrament with hygienic trepidation, but as a longed-for embassy of help in time of need. Emulate the woman with the twelve-year hemorrhage of blood who longed even to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. Jesus said, "Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me" (Luke 8:46).

#### **ANOTHER AREA OF CONCERN: "THIS" VS. "THAT" – PROXIMITY AND LOCALITY**

Paying close attention to the words of institution also points us to something that is hiding in plain view. When something hasn't been an issue before, it is easy to let certain things recede into the background and consequently think it might be more "grey" or abstract than it really is. When Jesus says of the bread that it is His body, He says, "this" and likewise of the cup, "this" (Greek: τοῦτό ἐστιν). It is an indicative, demonstrative pronoun that implies proximity. Proximity implies gathering, presence, locality, the physical closeness. Why is that crucial? Because "this" points to a local, present bread and cup. A form of the word "that" (for example, ἐκεῖνος, in Greek) would have been used if it were pointing to something elsewhere – "over there," as it were. This recalls the fact that the disciples were all gathered around the same table in the Upper Room at the institution of the Sacrament. This rules out, for instance, a radio, internet livestream, or other such broadcasted "consecration" to somewhere else. "This" implies "right here" while "that" would suggest "over there." The speaking, bread, cup and people, are to be with one another corporeally. "This" is consistent with God making Himself accessible for blessing in a localized way. In an excellent paper, Dr. John Kleinig has documented the sweep of the Old Testament theology of God's self-localization to make Himself available and accessible to us finite human beings who are also sinners. I strongly encourage reading his paper for an excellent summary of how Old Testament theology lays the groundwork for the New Testament fulfillment.<sup>10</sup>

We are talking about the Word who became flesh and made His dwelling among us. Jesus is and continues among us in the liturgy as the One who serves (Luke 22:27). Communion, as the name itself implies, ordinarily occurs with the physically gathered Church, which is mystical Body of Christ. Even with the Communion of shut-in congregational members, it is bringing church to them, not something apart from it. And with those people in need we still pray, "Our Father who art in heaven," rather than, "my Father." The etymology of the terms "congregation" and "church" (ἐκκλησία) imply flocking together and being called together out of the world around Christ's voice. To be sure, the church is not, properly speaking, a building made of bricks or wood, but when the church gathers around the Word and the Supper it can be very helpful to make use of a building constructed for church liturgy. It is a privilege not all Christians in history have enjoyed. Communing "together" is not simply a term of "feeling togetherness" (or like nostalgia) but it is descriptive of its spiritual or theological purpose. Again, for Christians, the spiritual is not something separated from the physical. Separating the physical from the spiritual is more the way of Greek philosophy and the ancient Gnostic heresy, not to mention more recent philosophical movements affecting society nowadays. We distinguish between them but do not separate them. A human being is both body and soul together. The whole human being benefits from the Lord's Supper.

For the Passover, Jesus has the Upper Room made ready ahead of time, but still in the gathering of the disciples with Jesus at table, He takes (λαβών) both the bread and the cup to Himself, after which He gives it to them as His powerful Word conveys the gift of His body and blood. There are things Jesus does that differ from typical Passover meals. What carries on is what is new. Here the bread is not given until He speaks. The cup is not given until He speaks. Similarly, the sacrament of Holy Baptism is personally administered from one person, as God's instrument, to another, who is being baptized with water from the hand of a present

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.johnkleinig.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2000-Where-is-Your-God.pdf>

individual. We cannot, as the silly example goes, drive down the street and baptize with a fire truck hose and use a bullhorn to utter the name of the Triune God, even if the person baptizing just might have a virus. There is a certain parallel in that regard between the personal administration of Baptism, and the Lord's body and blood given among the baptized faithful, at the same altar, from the hand of the *pastor loci* God put there.

We should cling to what is certain and avoid what is doubtful or speculative. It is a good idea to not walk along the edge of a cliff. The devil's exploitation of fear should not be allowed to drive a wedge into what the Lord has united in the institution of the Sacrament. There is a unity and order to the consecration and distribution of the blessed bread which is His body and the blessed wine which is His blood. The devil cannot create, but evil is taking the good things of God and distorting them to his idolatrous purposes. He exploits our doubts, enticing us to twist what God has here provided.

### **BROADCASTING INTERNET CONSECRATION OF BREAD AND WINE ELSEWHERE?**

Perhaps it has not been extremely common among Lutheran churches, but it was prevalent enough to warrant concern, since a minority of Lutheran congregations fell prey to speculation. They adopted pre-distributing bread and wine to be consecrated, according to speculation, via a Facebook, YouTube, or some other livestream internet technology. Notice the pattern. After a while error starts repeating itself. Again, this separates the unity of the "action" of the Lord's Supper. Pardon my bluntness here: We are not dealing with ordinary food here – this isn't a pickup and bake at home pizza. Perhaps there were some churches that even pre-recorded Communion services for "communion-on-demand." It is dumbfounding and tragic that so many of our clergy cannot discern what is clearly wrong with this.

Again, it should be recognized that the Words of Institution clearly imply by the use of the word "this" that there is locality and proximity of the words being spoken to the bread and wine, and the communicants. Perhaps the answer why some among us were susceptible to this distortion of the sacrament is because the groundwork was already laid in prior missteps and theological blind-spots. It's a reminder to all of us, keep up deliberate and well-rounded theological study. Do you want a doctor who hasn't cracked open a book or technical journal article since med school, even if he's really nice? We often forget what we don't keep reviewing. And even then, there are always more depths in the ocean of Scripture to explore.

Jesus is Immanuel: God with us. This is about reality not virtual reality – a disembodied trick of the senses, perhaps even enhanced with VR goggles. Virtual reality is merely an engineered simulation or illusion. We do not want something that simply plays the "role" of an "avatar" in a pseudo-sacrament, but the actual body and blood of Jesus given to us (*corpus verum* – the true body). The Lord's Supper is not just a spectacle we watch. John Calvin, influenced by Greek philosophy, taught that Christ could not be here on earth in His body since He ascended to the right hand of God ("up there," as it were). He neglected the communication of attributes between the divine and the human natures united in the person of Christ. This misunderstanding of the two natures in Christ we rightly refute.<sup>11</sup> At Christmas we sing, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate deity!" Let us not inadvertently, now, push away and divide what we fought the spiritualizing Calvinists to keep together here on earth for faith. Jesus, true God and true Man, delivers what His Word promises as we honor the context of what He commands when He says, "This do in remembrance of Me." "This" refers back to what He did in establishing His Supper.

The disciples were told to gather in one place for the Last Passover and the institution of the Lord's Supper on the night in which our Savior was betrayed into the hands of the religious and civil authorities. With there being political forces seeking to take them captive, this is certainly not a "safe gathering" in the Upper Room,

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<sup>11</sup> Read in *the Book of Concord*, Formula of Concord-Solid Declaration, Articles VII & VIII.

humanly speaking, as the Garden of Gethsemane and subsequent events would show. When the plot to kill Jesus was ratcheted up by the powers that be, we recall the pragmatic yet unwittingly prophetic words of Caiaphas to justify their action: “*You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish*” (John 11:49-50). While there was a lot of human hostility in the atmosphere of Jerusalem during Holy Week, no lack of incarnate divine love was manifest in the Upper Room. There Jesus had longed to celebrate this Passover with them on that solemn night, when He was betrayed by Judas for thirty pieces of silver, only to later die gruesomely. Judas thought he bought a patriotic solution for Israel only to find regret, guilt, and condemnation. Judas didn’t believe that Jesus is divine and wasn’t comforted by the Gospel message. But in compassion for His lost creatures made in His image, Jesus humbled Himself among us filthy sinners to restore us to immortality. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son into death, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. He calls to you, “Come, take up your cross and follow Me.” His kingdom is at hand.

### **IT IS THE LORD’S SUPPER, NOT OURS. TREAT IT ACCORDINGLY**

In his oft-referenced 1533 treatise, “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests,” Martin Luther instructs Christians isolated in Islamic-captive Turkey how to respond to their lack of clergy access in a dangerous political situation and cope with their desire for the Holy Supper of Christ’s body and blood:

And what must the Christians do who are held captive in Turkey? They cannot receive the sacrament and have to be content with their faith and desire which they have for the sacrament and the ordinance of Christ, just as those who die before baptism are nevertheless saved by their faith and desire for baptism. What did the children of Israel do in Babylon when they were unable to have public worship at Jerusalem except in faith and in sincere desire and longing? Therefore, even if the church would have been robbed completely of the sacrament by the pope, still, because the ordinance of Christ remained in their hearts with faith and desire, it would nevertheless have been preserved thereby, as indeed now in our time there are many who outwardly do without the sacrament for they are not willing to honor and strengthen the pope's abomination under one kind. For Christ's ordinance and faith are two works of God which are capable of doing anything.<sup>12</sup>

Faith clings to God’s clear Word and does not deviate to undependable human opinions. Notice here in this radical situation, nay “emergency,” what Luther does **not** suggest. He does not recommend risky theological speculation or aberrant practices. Faith doesn’t live on human opinion. He does not simply fling himself into indulging the anxiety of the people he is addressing and say, “God will just have to forgive me as I improvise.” Luther knows the further one departs from the institution of Christ, the more doubt creeps in and consequently the foundation of faith begins to crumble away. He would do them no favors by enabling their anxiety. The desire to commune “safer” does not outmaneuver communing according to Christ’s institution with fidelity. When falling into adapting through speculation the solidity of hope in Christ turns into nothing more than a wishful leap into the *Deus absconditus* (the “dark” speculative aspects of God, apart from His revealed Word).

Nothing can be more certain (or comforting for faith) than that which is done according to the mandate and institution of Christ. Faith clings not so much to what could possibly be in the abstract, nor to what we think “God would understand in our circumstances,” but rather to Christ’s clear promises and what He established. That is the foundation of receiving God’s promises in the inheritance bequeathed in the Lord’s Supper. In the temptation to improve upon what God has given, we should not put the Lord our God to the test or put words into His mouth that He did not say. The history of the Israelites in the wilderness is a warning against that sort of thing (1 Corinthians 10:1-22).

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<sup>12</sup> "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests" (*Luther's Works*, AE:38; p.207).

In that 1533 writing, Luther makes clear the reason why he holds to the position on the consecration he does is *that all may be certain as the object of faith*. Personal opinions must recede and speculation must be put away. “Feeling strongly” about something doesn’t mean we have it right or that we know what we are talking about biblically. In society we might “entitled to our opinion” but we aren’t entitled to our own facts (especially true with Scripture). The private mass Luther is dealing with in 1533 are masses performed by Roman priests for money, often meant to release souls from purgatory. They are celebrating masses without the congregation gathered. Such masses were done where none of the people communed, and the notion of the propitiatory sacrifice of the mass was promoted in the Roman church. The Lord’s Supper was turned into something human beings for God to pay for sins rather than something Christ does for us. All that is to say, that like some changes done in response to Covid, departure from the order, authority, and institution of Christ creates more doubt, not comfort to make the sacrament safer. There is nothing safe about changing what God has established. The Lord’s Supper is the holy of holies of the New Testament. In discussing the private mass, Luther says:

But I have not been commanded to perform the private mass and it is uncertain. In short, as St. Augustine says: *Tene certum, dimitte incertum* - “Rely on what is certain and abandon what is uncertain.” Yes, I even add, because it is uncertain whether the body and blood of Christ are present in the private mass and because it is certainly a purely human trifle, therefore you should never in your life believe that Christ's body and blood are present; for faith should be sure of its affairs and have a sure basis concerning which one must not and should not be in doubt.<sup>13</sup>

Luther notes the instrumentality of the called servant:

So it is not our work or speaking but the command and ordinance of Christ which make the bread the body and the wine the blood, beginning with the first Lord's Supper and continuing to the end of the world, and it is administered daily through our ministry or office.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout this treatise Luther deals with the certainty for faith, which comes in receiving what He has established with integrity to the institution. It is not done as a work to earn something, but that in observing the Supper with fidelity, we are sure it is genuinely that to which Christ attached His promise and blessings. Earlier, in 1527, Luther wrote against the charismatics of his day in his tremendous document, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This is My Body,’ Etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics,” in summary form:

We know, however, that it is the Lord’s Supper, in name and in reality, not the supper of Christians. For the Lord not only instituted it, but also prepares and gives it himself, and is himself cook, butler, food, and drink, as we have demonstrated our belief above. Christ does not say, in commanding and instituting it, “Do this as your summons to mutual recognition and love,” but, “Do this in remembrance of me” [Luke 22:19, I Cor. 11:24].<sup>15</sup>

This perhaps, in part, has explained a preference of Martin Luther for referring to the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar as *‘the Lord’s Supper,’* or the *‘Holy Supper.’* They emphasize that it belongs to God and He is the one doing it. We receive this sacrament, as with all the mysteries of God, as it is given from the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The pastor is particularly charged to be the local steward of the mysteries of God. He is steward but does not own it and neither does the congregation. In administering it, he is obliged to be like a pharmacist and spiritual father. It is the solid food of faith. Neither the pastor, nor a board of elders, nor a synodical official may do with it as he or they please or authorize changing it when it seems best to them. Neither are they free to stick their heads in the sand about it if others in our synodical fellowship propose such. The institution of Christ is determinative and they are servants joyfully under that Word and not over it.

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<sup>13</sup> “The Private Mass...”, p.163

<sup>14</sup> “The Private Mass...”, p.199

<sup>15</sup> “That These Words of Christ, ‘This Is My Body,’ Etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics” (*Luther’s Works, AE:37, p.142*).

As it is given to us from the Lord, through the apostles, so we deliver it to the Church for her nourishment in the wilderness of the world in the last days. Given that it is for bestowing forgiveness, everlasting life, and salvation, we cannot be more compassionate than the omniscient Lord who gave the gift His way. The Bride of Christ gratefully receives what the Bridegroom has provided, and the children of the churchly household submit to His fatherly generosity. Remember the Lord's response when the Israelites complained at various times during their forty-year journey after the Exodus. The Lord's mysteries do not need adjustment for the culture to be relevant or adequate. The Blessed Sacrament is the medicine of immortality and antidote to death, as we confess with the ancient church. Because of that recognition, we fittingly observe it with the highest reverence. It is meet, right, and salutary that we give thanks. From His altar, the Lord bestows His holiness upon us. Holiness is the most sanitary hygiene there is – for the body and blood, which have already been sacrificed, are now raised and glorified, and sanctify God's faithful baptized people. In the early church, the declaration at the beginning of the Communion part of the liturgy was, "The holy things to the holy people!"

### **SLOWING DOWN TO LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD**

Assumed-emergencies, quasi-exile status, and exuberant pastoral desire deliver the gifts to the people, without careful biblical fidelity to the "this do," can worsen the pre-existent theological fractures and catechetical blind-spots more dramatically in the life of the church. Then ongoing situations can institutionalize these problems for generations. Pastorally, we do not want compromises made to address fears to jeopardize the benefits and integrity of that which feeds faith in disturbing times. We do not wish to compromise among us the very marks of the church themselves in order to serve the church. We don't want an *ersatz* Supper, merely the empty husk of something no longer life-giving as it was "adjusted" into dysfunctionality and infertility. We would be like the man sitting on the tree limb cutting it out from under himself while he dutifully saws away. To boil this down: We can't depart from the institution in order to deliver that which is only given through honoring the institution.

The Words of our Lord spoken within the institution command "this do" inhabit a context for the mandate to be fulfilled. One broadcasting a recitation of the *Verba Testamenti* cannot "take the bread" or "give it to them," and so forth, where the sacrament is intended to be administered. It has lost its union or never had it. It is utterly dubious. We cannot afford to lose the Augustinian aphorism. St. Augustine cries out: *tene certum, dimitte incertum!* Grab on tenaciously to what is biblically certain, and run away from what is uncertain or wishful thinking, no matter how pious-sounding.

### **LAYPEOPLE ADMINISTERING COMMUNION TO THEMSELVES?**

The grace of God comes from outside of us through the means of grace (*externum verbum*). The Lord designates His called men to be instruments of the Holy Spirit to deliver the Word and Sacraments. The purpose is to create and sustain faith in Christ the crucified One (see Augsburg Confession, Article V) through whom we are justified. Even when a lay-elder or lay-deacon or vicar (in training, but not yet a pastor) assists the pastor in the distribution of the cup, he does this as one serving auxiliary to the called and ordained pastor, as an extension of his given ministry. "Communion" implies a shared union rather than each one having something unto himself or herself alone. In the institution, Jesus takes up both the bread and the wine to Himself, gives thanks, and then distributes it as something new via His Word, to the present disciples. The action is from Him to us, but only with His Word joined to the bread and wine first. But it is from His hands. There is an order and authority given to it as it is mandated to continue in the Church.<sup>16</sup>

Now concerning the laity administering the Lord's Supper to themselves, C.F.W. Walther, the first president of

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<sup>16</sup> Some key biblical passages in this regard: Romans 10:15; Hebrews 5:4; 1 Cor. 4:1-2; Jeremiah 23:21; Hebrews 13:17.

the Missouri Synod, writing in harmony with Augsburg Confession, Article XIV, has written this in his *Pastoral Theology*:

The great majority of our theologians, Luther in the forefront, believe that the holy Supper should never be administered privately by one who is not in the public preaching office, by a layman. That is partly because no such necessity can occur with the holy Supper, as with Baptism and Absolution, that would justify a departure from God's ordinance ( I Cor 4:1; Romans 10:15; Heb 5:4); partly because the holy Supper "is a public confession and so should have a public minister"; partly because schisms can easily be brought about by such private Communion...<sup>17</sup>

The liturgy, in the *Book of Concord*, is identified with the public ministry of Christ giving His Word and Sacraments in His good ordering (as we read earlier). The liturgy is not the "work of the people" as the modern Roman Catholic church has said, or put in protestant terms, our praise service for God. To be sure, there is properly our response, but the initiating, divine monergism of the Divine Service is so that everything in the Church, as the Large Catechism says, may be so arranged that we may daily receive the forgiveness of sins (Third Article, Large Catechism). But it is not about getting more people involved "up front." The chancel is not a stage for performance but where God delivers His gifts.

With regard to the office of the ministry we ought to bear in mind the fact pointed out earlier, that in the previously cited "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests" of Luther in 1533, he does not condone or recommend any attempts of "lay consecration" of the Supper but simply recommends for exiled Christians in Turkey to be content, given their situation, with their hunger and thirst for the Sacrament. The Lutheran fathers, including Martin Chemnitz and Formula of Concord, walked a careful line. Hence, in their denial that, "No man's word or work, be it the merit or speaking of the minister," causes the corporeal presence is not to deny that the body and blood are, "distributed through our ministry and office" (cf. FC-SD, VII.74-77). Chemnitz states clearly that, "it is with those who are legitimately chosen and called by God through the church, therefore with the ministers to whom the use or administration of the ministry of the Word and the sacraments has been committed."<sup>18</sup> It is not merely that the pastor "oversees" the activity of others so acting under delegation or "presides" in that aloof way, but is involved in the local giving – which is the meaning of "officiating." The minister administers the gift, though there might be certain qualified men who serve as assistants.<sup>19</sup> There are various considerations involved in that that we cannot cover here.

In Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession, to guard against the rumors the Roman Catholics of the day have been hearing about the evangelical Lutherans, it is stated most clearly, "Concerning church order they [our churches] teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called." Arthur Carl Piepkorn remarks regarding the background of why this article is included in the Augsburg Confession.

...[I]t is the response of the Lutheran theologians to the charge that John Eck made in his 404 Propositions that the Lutherans denied the existence of the sacrament of orders, called it a figment of human invention, and asserted that any layman at all can consecrate churches, confirm children, and so on (Wilhelm Gussmann, *D. Johann Ecks Vierhundertvier Artikel zum Reichstag von Augsburg 1530* [Kassel:Edmund Pillardy, 1930], nos.267 to 268, pp.134 and 177-78). The Lutheran response is that

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<sup>17</sup> C.F.W. Walther. *Pastoral Theology*. Trans. John M. Drickamer. (New Haven: Lutheran News Inc, 1995); p.134

<sup>18</sup> Martin Chemnitz. *Examination of the Council of Trent: Volume II*, p.97

<sup>19</sup> In the case of a pastor's customary "self-communion" (which is indicated in the *Lutheran Service Book* rubrics and in Luther's Mass revisions) there we distinguish between the person and the office of the pastor, in which case, it might be said that the office is communing the person. This ancient rubric is well-established for clergy at a regular service where the congregation is present.

laymen are not admitted to the really crucial tasks of publicly and responsibly proclaiming the Gospel and of administering the sacraments.<sup>20</sup>

The Latin of AC XIV is “*rite vocatus*” and the German says “*ordentlicher beruf.*” Again, Piepkorn comments on the meaning of the language of Augsburg Confession, Article XIV:

...the word *rite* in *rite vocatus* implies in the normal terminology of the 16th century a formal ordination as something over and above a mere calling. Both *vocatio* (“calling”) and *ordinatio* (“ordination”) are extensively used in this period to describe the whole process of election and ordination.<sup>21</sup>

In his helpful book, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites in the Early Reformation Church*, Ralph F. Smith notes: “The target of Luther’s polemical critique was a sacrificial priesthood (*Opferpriestertum*), not an ordination that properly set a person in the office of preaching in relation to a specific community.”<sup>22</sup> Baptism and faith make priestly Christians (1 Peter 2:9) but divine call and ordination to the office (through means of the Church) makes a man a pastor and minister in the Church chiefly for the means of grace. Every Christian is a priest, but not all hold the preaching office (*predigtamt*). Both the royal priesthood of baptized believers, and the pastoral office of the Word and Sacraments, each have their unique realms of service. They appreciated best when recognized as unique gifts, and not in competition or comparison with one another. But let us apply this to laity self-communing.

Ultimately, we understand that Jesus Himself is the celebrant or liturgist and that the pastor is serving in an office for the administration of the means of grace and as His icon. This arrangement emphasizes the divine monergism of faith being fed (*sola gratia* – via grace alone) by the external Word. As the Father sent Jesus, so those called men are sent to serve the Bride of Christ. The man who is given to be local pastor is representative of the present Christ to the Bride of Christ, there locally in the *koinonia* of baptized believers. That pastors are not representing themselves is rationale for clergy wearing liturgical vestments and clerical collars – in freedom, the ancient church developed and continued customs to visually display the office (See Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV.1). The body and blood of Christ are given to you, the baptized, instructed communicant, from an external “other” that was designed as such by God, via His call to a man and being put under orders to serve.

The “action” of the Lord’s Supper, as described by the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians, is a threefold action of the Supper. Consecration, distribution, and reception are the indivisible action belonging to the divine mandate. The office bearer consecrates and distributes, all receive. Not only are the body and blood present in the reception, but also in the distribution (according to the Lord’s word), in the thought of the Confessions. This threefold action is not to be divided up, so the office holder is to carry it out reverently. The Formula of Concord summarizes (emphasis added):

In the administration of Communion the words of institution are to be **spoken or sung distinctly and clearly before the congregation** and are under no circumstances to be omitted. Thereby we render obedience to the command of Christ, ‘This do.’ Thereby the faith of the hearers in the essence and benefits of this sacrament (the presence of the body and blood of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits which Christ has won for us by his death and the shedding of his blood and which he give to us in his testament) is awakened, strengthened

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<sup>20</sup> Arthur Carl Piepkorn. “The Sacred Ministry and Holy Ordination in the Symbolical Books of the Lutheran Church.” in Michael P. Plekon and William S. Wiecher. *The Church: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*. (Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau Books, 1993); p.62

<sup>21</sup> Piepkorn, (Plekon/Wiecher); pp.62

<sup>22</sup> Ralph F. Smith. *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites in the Early Reformation Church* (Renaissance and Baroque: Studies and Texts 15). (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996, 2000); p.54

and confirmed through his Word. And thereby the elements of bread and wine are hallowed or blessed in this holy use, so that therewith the body and blood of Christ are distributed to us to eat and to drink, as Paul says, "The cup of blessing which we bless," which happens precisely through the repetition and recitation of the words of institution.

The Confessions distinguish between the ministers "who speak" and the parishioners "who hear." The church is made up of those who speak and those who hear. In discussing the Lord's Supper, the quotation above from the Formula of Concord applies this. The Words of Institution "are under no circumstances to be omitted." More than this they are to be spoken or sung "clearly and distinctly **before the people**" (*deutlich und klar*). Through this, the bread and the wine are consecrated. There is proximity between both the communion elements and the communicants. Hence in the understanding of Formula of Concord-Solid Declaration VII and the Large Catechism, the Words of Institution are said simultaneously over the elements and before the people. That rules out internet-streamed consecration or radio or tv for that matter. And this is the assumed Lutheran practice in our Augsburg Confession (Article XXIV.35-40 – emphasis added) and they affirm ancient church patterns rather than improvising:

Chrysostom says 36] that **the priest stands daily at the altar, inviting some 37] to the Communion and keeping back others**. And it appears from the ancient Canons that some one celebrated the Mass **from whom all the other presbyters and deacons received the body of the Lord**; for thus 38] the words of the Nicene Canon say: Let the deacons, according to their order, receive the Holy Communion after the presbyters, from the bishop or from a presbyter. 39] **And Paul, 1 Cor. 11:33, commands concerning the Communion: Tarry one for another, so that there may be a common participation.**

40] Forasmuch, therefore, as the Mass **with us has the example of the Church, taken from the Scripture and the Fathers, we are confident that it cannot be disapproved**, especially since public ceremonies, for the most part like those hitherto in use, are retained; only the number of Masses differs, which, because of very great and manifest abuses doubtless might be profitably reduced.

## THE LORD SENDS RELEASE TO CAPTIVES

The forces of this world would make you captive. What enslaves us? Fear, the cravings of the flesh, worry, the powerful of the world, pining for escape, not relying upon the present Lord who has given you certain promises as you bear your God-given crosses. Our times, the breath of our lungs, all these things are in the Lord's keeping. The reigning Lord Jesus holds the keys of death and hell. Jesus is your Alpha and Omega. Therefore, put not your trust in princes, in mortal men who cannot save (Psalm 146:3). As Paul told Pastor Timothy (1 Timothy 6):

*O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—<sup>21</sup> by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith.*

The gifts of Christ that He bestows to His Bride in the Divine Service are meant to bring us cleansing, pardon, joy, inspire reverence in the presence of the holy God, and to abolish the fear of death because Christ has indeed conquered it. After winning the victory for us, Christ descended into hell to make the victory clear and that hell and death are under His control (Revelation 1:12-18). He then appeared openly and showed Himself alive for forty days before His ascension to the right hand of God. He ascended in power to fill all things as the God-Man. He lives and reigns to all eternity and will at the last appear again openly with all the host of heaven to reveal that victory over sin, death, and the devil to in consummation outwardly and openly (Ephesians 1:13-23). That is all packaged up for us week after week, in a hidden way, as He is among us as the One who serves in the Holy Supper. Like old Simeon in Luke 2, we behold the promised Messiah under the humble appearance so that we may depart in peace according to the Lord's Word, knowing the ultimate victory is ours.

## **GATHERING AROUND THE MARKS OF THE CHURCH OFTEN HASN'T BEEN SAFE, BUT WE STILL GATHER**

Before this paper draws to a close, I want to mention a couple of other points to consider for our day. If one examines various chapters and places of church history throughout the centuries, the realization that being a Christian has seldom been safe, convenient, or comfortable much of the time. In the early church, persecution by Jewish and Roman authorities brought great distress. Persecution from pagans as the Gospel was brought into new regions brought persecution. We know Christians in Communist, fascistic, Islamic, and other atheistic regimes have suffered grievous persecution. The Church in Europe endured times of war, plague, political strife, economic hardship, and censorship. Being a Christian, and Church gathering for Divine Service, in much of history has been anything but safe from an ordinary human perspective. For this reason, the writer to the Hebrews (Hebrews 10:9-25) admonished the church to mutual brotherly encouragement to faithfulness in times of danger, persecution, and fear:

9 Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, 21 and having a High Priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, 25 not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

If we have concern for receiving the benefits of the Sacrament of the Altar, which is what an early church father called, “the medicine of immortality and the antidote to death,” then we should be sure we do not dilute or use the medicine “off label,” as it were. We should not treat the medicine as though it were the danger, polluting or vacating its benefit. It is the Bread of Life who has come down from heaven for the life of the world (see John 6). There is much more to be considered than pragmatically getting it done, as if satisfying retail customers. In America, the church has been beset by individualism run amok in our ecclesiology, which, in turn, has affected our understanding of what it means to be at the receiving end of the means of salvation. It is to be the flock in the pasture provided by the Good Shepherd, Jesus, who watches over His sheep. The Lord desires to have fellowship with His Bride, as Jesus calls the church in Laodicea back to His table:

“As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent. 20 Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, **I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.** 21 To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:19-22 – emphasis added; compare to the hymn “Soul Adorn Thyself with Gladness” – TLH 305; LSB 636).

## **A LAST ASIDE: SETTING EXTRA REQUIREMENT ON ATTENDING DIVINE SERVICE**

In some ways, this may be the most controversial thing in this article. Should we be setting up extra requirements for receiving the Gospel? Should a mask, a vaccine, vaccine passport, a social credit score on a QR code, a temperature check, or some other church or government-mandated thing be allowed to be prerequisite to hearing the Gospel and for baptized, instructed communicants, receiving the Lord’s Supper with the assembly? Should it be allowed for inquiring visitors who are curious to hear the Good News? Should we put it out front on the church sign for all to see?

The early church faced a controversy over circumcision that we have recounted in Acts and in Galatians, whereby it is basically summarized as: does a Gentile converting to Christianity need to become a Jew first before becoming a Christian? The answer is no. While the moral law still holds as descriptive of God’s design of creation, the old ceremonial law had no obligation in the New Testament fulfillment. Even those ethnically of Jewish heritage who were becoming believers in Christ as the Savior were not obliged to go back. In

Galatians 3, the Apostle Paul summarizes the universal offer of salvation, since Christ has once and for all atoned for the sins of the world, all people of all time:

<sup>24</sup>Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. <sup>26</sup>For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>27</sup>For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Even early in times of persecution, visitors would be welcomed to attend the Divine Service through the sermon and be dismissed after that, just as were those going through instruction. Though there was a security risk or danger for the congregation because of unknown people visiting the gathering, they were allowed in nonetheless, because it was more important that they hear the Gospel. And in many places, Christianity itself was illegal or at least not legally protected. Even in those cases, submission to civil authority had its limits under the law of God. All civil authority has limits. It is not right to submit to Caesar when Caesar tries to control what God has clearly given and commanded His Church to carry out. As Jesus told Pontius Pilate, "You would have no authority at all were it not given you from above." Think of Christians today living in Syria, Iraq, or for that matter in China or even in Scandinavian countries (which used to be fairly Lutheran at one point) and the dangers through which they persevere.

What do we, intentionally or unintentionally, communicate about "making disciples of all nations" and "showing no favoritism" when we place restrictions at the church entrance, which discriminate as to who may sit and hear the Gospel proclaimed to members or visitors. John the Baptist proclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The church is not a branch of local law enforcement or any other branch of government. While we still should rightfully practice closed communion according to the office of the keys with unity in doctrine, church attendance and hearing the Word of God is indeed open. It is ironic that many of the congregations who have been rather irresponsibly loose in altar fellowship are also the ones who are often the most stringent in their regime of Covid rules. Churches which had practiced an open door to access the New Testament Holy of Holies as if it were simply hospitality are more than ready to close the door to even church attendance to hear the Good News at the first sniffle. Recall the admonition of James (2:1-5):

My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, *the Lord* of glory, with partiality. <sup>2</sup>For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, <sup>3</sup>and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool," <sup>4</sup>have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? <sup>5</sup>Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

What underlies this contradiction between loose communion fellowship (contrary to divine mandate – *de iure divino*) and legalistic Covid rules (by human mandate – *de iure humano*) in the same congregation? Do we forget from 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 that the sacrament can be received to one's harm? Why follow CDC "guidelines" or executive orders (which aren't actually laws) more religiously than Scripture and the Confessions (see Galatians 1:10)? Where is our fear, love, and trust? Is there perhaps some wisdom in simply allowing individuals of various personal health considerations to responsibly enact their own precautions in consultation with their physician, rather than blanket rules or policies for everyone, however kindly-intended? Freedom in things which are neither commanded nor forbidden by God, and fidelity in what God has commanded is the way of the Church under the Gospel. Remember how Jesus, the Great Physician, was mocked by the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees: "*How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?*"

**BOTTOM LINE: SHOULDN'T CHRISTIANS DEAL WITH FEARS AND DANGERS DIFFERENTLY THAN UNBELIEVERS? YES, VERY DIFFERENTLY, ESPECIALLY WHERE GOD MADE SPECIFIC PROMISES.**

The demons, the fallen angels, know their time is short. In the dark corners they bluster to build a fake worldly kingdom in their brittle existence and speak lies to get you to join them in their terrorized existence. They fear the appearance of God's kingdom, rightfully so. The arrogant and powerful of mankind still want their Tower of Babel technocracy. It is an earthly reflection of demonic desire. To the unbeliever, the dark terror of the impending judgment or nihilism is morbidly contagious. The people who built the tower at Babel heard the oral history about the flood of judgment God sent and shuddered. The psyche of mankind wants to press the mute button on the verdict against the devastation of sin against the Creator. Fallen humanity keeps trying to rationalize the curse.

For the Christian, we are oppressed by these things because of the fallen flesh that persists until we die, and because we live in that same world. But as baptized believers in Christ we know better and strengthen the new man in Christ with the body and blood of the crucified and risen One. Daily we learn that we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things, and that are forgiven. Luther's First Commandment self-examination is helpful here. Luther helps us identify the areas where we need to repent each day. Note Luther's diagnosis of your functional or practical God in the *Large Catechism*:

What does it mean to have a god? or, what is God? 2] Answer: A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress, so that to have a God is nothing else than to trust and believe Him from the [whole] heart; as I have often said that the confidence and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol. 3] If your faith and trust be right, then is your god also true; and, on the other hand, if your trust be false and wrong, then you have not the true God; for these two belong together, faith and God. That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god. 4] Therefore it is the intent of this commandment to require true faith and trust of the heart which settles upon the only true God, and clings to Him alone. That is as much as to say: "See to it that you let Me alone be your God, and never seek another," i.e.: Whatever you lack of good things, expect it of Me, and look to Me for it, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, creep and cling to Me. I, yes, I, will give you enough and help you out of every need; only let not your heart cleave to or rest in any other.

Thankfully the law is not God's only Word to us. We are joined to the One who was dead and now lives. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law. Christians have an eternal place to stand in the face of suffering, illness, fear, or even death. St. Paul writes in Colossians 3:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. 2 Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. 3 For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

In Baptism we die with Christ. That is a daily thing in Baptism (Romans 6) and yet there we have that checked off the list, so to speak. As death has no more dominion over Christ, it has no more dominion over you. Death is not your lord, but Jesus who conquered death lives and reigns to all eternity. The Lamb who was slain, now lives, and is upon the throne. Though we bear sorrows and worries when we gather we are not alone at the altar, left to our own devices. Communion is the opposite of being socially-distanced, isolated, hermetically-sealed, or virtual reality. The Lord knew what He was doing when He instituted the sacrament as it is in Scripture. All things are in His keeping. He was not surprised by all that has happened since 2020 or ever. Therefore, now, all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Our Lord Jesus reigns at the right hand of power and fills all things. He is not separate from our suffering but is with us always. He goes with us through the church doors and feeds us with Himself at the altar with His crucified, risen, and glorified body and blood, and then goes with you. May the ultimate hope we have in Christ fortify us with peace in the face of sorrows in this life:

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

The sting of death is taken away in Christ. In the Lord's Supper there is no gap between you and the everlasting life you have in Jesus. The risen Christ shows His wounds: *The peace of the Lord be with you always!* God grant our posture to dangers would remain faithful to His Word and boldly communicate His Easter victory to the world around us, with our hearts at peace and rest in Him. We cry out in joy, "He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" May we, by God's grace, be like the faithful saints described in Revelation 12:11: "And they overcame [the devil] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death." The cause of death is sin. The medicine to deliver healing to immortality is what the Divine Service is all about. May we then, in harmony with the early church, continue "steadfastly in the Apostles doctrine and fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

The Word they still shall let remain  
Nor any thanks have for it;  
He's by our side upon the plain  
With His good gifts and Spirit.  
And take they our life,  
Goods, fame, child, and wife,  
Let these all be gone,  
They yet have nothing won;  
The Kingdom ours remaineth. Amen!

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