Virtual Communion and the Real Presence

by

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What follows is not intended to be a scholarly paper, exegeting Scripture and drawing on learned sources, it is rather a more or less spontaneous reflection on the challenge of whether or not Reformed Protestant Christians should seek a cyber experience of the Lord’s Supper. But spontaneity is not impetuosity and so it draws on the personal experience of nearly fifty years of ordained ministry, seeking in a variety of situations, appropriate and Biblical responses to circumstances which often have been less than ideal.

The well-known pioneering British mountaineer, George Mallory, when asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, spontaneously responded with this retort, “Because it is there!” I think there is something of that spirit influencing Christian thought during this challenging time of lockdown and social distancing in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Services can be and are being live-streamed or Zoomed. Some churches, like All Souls in central London, have the skills necessary to utilise highly sophisticated editing technology to stitch together in remarkable symphony their socially distancing choir and orchestra. So then, why not bring the sacraments to the screen? Well, perhaps not baptism, but why not Holy Communion? At present there is a proliferation of articles currently advocating various forms of ‘virtual communion’ or ‘cyber-supper’ as a solution to the problems posed by the ban on gatherings and the threat of the transmission of COVID 19.

I must confess that I am seriously doubtful of the validity of online Communion services at any time, not least during the current pandemic. I am reinforced in my resistance when lockdowns and social-distancing restrictions are expected to be of relatively short duration, possibly a matter of months at the most. I can't help but feel that in too hastily seeking internet solutions to Holy Communion we are in danger of diluting the significance of the sacrament and robbing it of at least two of its essential aspects, that is to say, the “oneness of the elements and the togetherness of the sharing,” as Garry Williams has so helpfully put it in his essay Can we Celebrate the Lord’s Supper in Lockdown? No. Without the “oneness of the elements and the togetherness of the sharing” whatever an online service watched at home purports to be, it cannot surely be an authentic Christian Communion service.

I know I am not alone in feeling uncomfortable about adapting a procedure very similar to one formerly practiced by televangelists and often condemned by Reformed theologians, namely, the encouraging of a disparate TV audience to ‘gather’ around the their TV sets to partake of Communion, using whatever ‘elements’ they can find in the cupboard at home.

I have no taste to be involved in such expedients, and there is much that could be said against them. But, to me, the heart of the current debate revolves around a simpler question: the frequency with which the Supper ought to be celebrated. Or, to put it another way, how long an interval should be allowed to pass between celebrations before emergency measures become necessary?

As always, some historical perspective is helpful. We all know that the Reformed community has never finally settled the question of the frequency with which the Lord’s Supper should be celebrated. Anglicans and Lutherans mostly communicate weekly, at least. Calvin preferred a weekly observation, but for him it was not a matter of essential doctrine and so he settled for a compromise, monthly communions. In Scotland, his disciple John Knox, facing the dire exigencies of his situation, including widely spaced parishes and an inadequacy of ministers, opted for an annual or a six-monthly celebration of the sacrament. By the first half of the seventeenth century, some Scottish parishes struggled to have even an annual communion, and, as Gordon Donaldson reminds us, in Duncan Forrester and Douglas Murray (eds.), Studies in the History of the Worship in Scotland (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), it is on record...
that in some parishes periods as long as ‘twelve, eighteen or even twenty-four years passed with a
celebration.’ By the middle of the seventeenth century, *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship*
stipulated that ‘the communion, or supper of the Lord, is frequently to be celebrated.’ But just how
frequently was unstated, and the question was left to the discretion of local church leadership.
Consequently, Scottish practice remained largely unchanged. It was not until the rise of the influence
of the liturgical movement, sometimes unfairly dubbed Scoto-Catholicism, that communions became
more frequent in the Church of Scotland. But among more conservative confessional Scottish Presbyterians it
has only been within the last two or three decades that some have opted for a more frequent observation,
whether quarterly or monthly.

Looking at the problem of the temporary deprivation of the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper from a
Scottish Presbyterian historical perspective, and in the light of the Westminster Standards, leaves one
wondering why it is deemed so urgently necessary to invent a cyber or virtual sacrament. I, for one, am
prepared to wait until it is again possible to enjoy the real presence of the Body of Christ, my fellow
believers in the “oneness of the elements and the togetherness of the sharing.”

I recently read an argument in favour of virtual online celebrations of Communion which appealed to the
Jewish celebration of the Passover. If that feast was, and still is, observed within families, so the
argument went, could not Holy Communion also be celebrated within families? Without addressing the
vital question of the true nature of the New Covenant Christian family that meets to celebrate
Communion, my immediate response was to argue that as Passover was an annual feast it will do us very
little harm, if harm at all, to wait until we are gathered once more together in the same space.

The only argument to the contrary that would have any force with me, is the sacramentalist argument that
Communion is essential for the transmission of grace. But we as Reformed Protestants do not subscribe
to such a view. The sacraments belong to the *bene esse* of faith, not to the *esse*. Union with Christ, the
Word of God, faith itself, the things which are signified and sealed by the Supper, these are essential. The
sacraments themselves, important as they are as ordinances of our Lord, are beneficial.

Moreover, waiting with patience is an essential part of responding in faith to the tribulations of human
experience. This heightens our sense of solidarity and empathy for those who at this time may loose their
jobs, their health, their family and friends, their lives, even their souls. It strikes me as being self-indulgent
to seek speedy but essentially unsatisfactory solutions to our temporary deprivation. When the restraints
are lifted, and when we do eventually come together, with what heightened awareness we will gather as
the Body of Christ to once again share bread and wine in an extraordinarily joyful Eucharist. I would
rather not dilute that experience by adopting ‘virtual’ parodies of what Holy Communion is intended
always to be.

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