

RESPONSE OF THE THEOLOGY COMMITTEE TO GA41-31

In 2021 the General Assembly approved Recommendation 41-31, “that the 41st General Assembly refer to the Permanent Theology Committee for study and exploration the matter of virtual communion in the EPC with regard to our constitution and practice and to report to the 42nd General Assembly with any possible recommendations.” In response to this recommendation, and according to the duties of this committee expressed in *Rules For Assembly* 10-1E.2 “to receive and study such theological matters as may be referred to it by the General Assembly and to return to the General Assembly its opinions and requested papers or documents” the committee responds to GA41-31 with the following conclusion.

Virtual communion, as a practice in the EPC, was temporarily permissible during the exigent circumstances of the recent COVID-19 pandemic.¹ This permission originated from a provisional opinion issued by the Stated Clerk, sustained by the Permanent Judicial Commission, and ratified by the 40th General Assembly in GA40-30.² The effect of the ruling was limited as follows, “until physical gatherings are no longer prohibited or the 40th General Assembly acts on it, whichever comes first.” GA40-30 has by its very terms expired and no longer has effect on the administration of the Lord’s Supper in the EPC. Therefore, the practice of virtual communion is no longer permissible, and it is proper that the Church affirm and maintain the normative practice for the administration of the Lord’s Supper.

The Administration of the Lord’s Supper

The witness of Scripture and our Constitution agree that the sacrament is properly observed in a public worship service where the congregation is physically gathered. When the Apostle Paul gave direction to the church in Corinth regarding the administration of the Lord’s Supper, it was in the context of “when you come together” (1 Corinthians 11:17, 18, 20, 33, 34), a physical assembly of the Body of Christ.

The *Book of Worship* (BoW) assumes that the context and distribution of the elements all necessitate a physical assembly of God’s people.

- “While Christians may worship God at any time and in any place, they especially worship God in places set aside for that purpose . . . For that reason, it is appropriate to gather for corporate worship in a place set aside for the special purpose of praising, glorifying and worshipping God” (BoW 2-2). “As the people gather, they should do so in a quiet and reverent manner . . . All should be present at the appointed house, unite in all parts of the worship, and depart only when the benediction is pronounced” (BoW 2-3.A,B).
- Regarding the context of ordinary and special celebrations, the Lord’s Supper, “should be ordinarily celebrated as a part of the regular service of worship” (BoW 3-3.F). The

¹ Consideration of hypothetical future circumstances were beyond the scope of GA 41-31 and therefore not evaluated.

² **Minutes** of the 40th General Assembly, 145.

Session may authorize the Lord's Supper to be celebrated with those who are ill, and should have at least one other member of the Session present (BoW 3-3.G.1). The Session may also authorize the celebration at other times and places, "provided that the Session is represented" (BoW 3-3.G.2).³

- On the Distribution of the Elements, the bread is to be "broken before the people" as a visible representation of the death of Christ (BoW 3-3.L.3) and "it is proper for the people to gather at the table, but ordinarily the Ruling Elders (or others appointed by the Session) shall distribute the elements to the worshipers" (BoW 3-3.M).

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* outlines the mode of administration of the Lord's Supper:

"In the administration of the Lord's Supper Jesus has directed his ministers to declare to the congregation his words instituting this sacrament, to pray, and to bless the bread and wine, which are thus set apart from their ordinary use and put to holy use. His ministers are to take and break the bread, to take the cup, and (communicating themselves, too) to give both to the communicants – but not to anyone else not present at that time in the congregation" (WCF 29.3).

Likewise, *Westminster Larger Catechism* 169 speaks to administering the Lord's Supper:

Q. How has Christ appointed bread and wine to be given and received in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

A. Christ has appointed, in the administration of this sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to set apart the bread and wine from common use, by the word of institution, thanksgiving, and prayer; to take and break the bread, and to give both the bread and the wine to the communicants: who are, by the same appointment, to take and eat the bread, and to drink the wine, in thankful remembrance that the body of Christ was broken and given, and His blood shed, for them.⁴

The consistent witness of Scripture, our constitution, and confessional standards is that the proper context for administering the Lord's Supper is the physical gathering of God's people, where the elements are given and received according to Christ's command.

³ See *Acts of Assembly* 14-02 with reference to **Minutes**, 34-40.

⁴ J.G. Vos on WLC 169: "There are six sacramental actions involved in the Lord's Supper. Four of them were performed by Jesus (taking the bread and cup, giving thanks, breaking the bread, giving the bread and the cup to the disciples). Two sacramental actions were performed by the disciples (taking the bread and the cup; eating the bread and drinking the wine). These six sacramental actions, taken together in their true meaning, portray or act out the atonement of Christ and a sinner's receiving him by faith." Johannes Geerhardus Vos and G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2002), 487.