



“Virtual” Communion

Issued by Stated Clerk Jeff Jeremiah

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Provisional Opinion

It is the ruling of the Stated Clerk that the administration of the Lord’s Supper during a virtual worship service is temporarily permissible under the Constitution. This ruling will remain in effect until physical gatherings are no longer prohibited or the 40th General Assembly acts on it, whichever comes first.

Background/Commentary

In response to the unique crisis that is the COVID-19 pandemic, Presbytery of the Southeast Stated Clerk Bill Dudley and Presbytery of the Pacific Southwest Stated Clerk Mark Eshoff asked the Stated Clerk for guidance about the advisability of administering the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper during virtual worship services. The Constitution enables the Stated Clerk to give advice or make rulings on subjects brought to him that are “new, delicate, or difficult” (*Book of Government* 21-3D.I).

The COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent impact on the life and worship of the EPC is certainly new, delicate, *and* difficult. Two factors stand out in this situation:

1. ***Prohibition from physically gathering to worship.*** As federal, state, and local governments have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, physical gatherings have been severely limited, if not banned altogether. We honor God by obeying these directives from our government (Romans 13:1-7).
2. ***Availability of gathering “virtually” to worship.*** Technological advances in the late 20th century ushered in the possibility of gathering “virtually.” In the last ten years this has become increasingly available and has enabled churches to worship virtually. Because of the prohibitions against physical gatherings, this currently is the *only* way for many of our churches to gather. While not ideal, to gather and worship to the extent the church is able is a blessing and encouragement to God’s people. Many churches are doing this.

Responses

1. 1 Corinthians 11:2-34 addresses the worship of the church in Corinth. “Gathering” is referred to five times; this is understood to be physically together in one place. As verses 17-34 specifically address the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the sacrament may only be administered in a physical gathering of believers, as no other type of gathering was envisioned. For this reason, a church may decide that it is not appropriate to celebrate the Lord’s Supper during a virtual worship service.
2. However, it is possible to interpret and apply 1 Corinthians 11 in another way, while still honoring the principle of Christian worship.

In Section 6 of “Holy Scripture” in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (hereafter WCF), liberty is given to work out the principle of Christian worship according to changes in circumstances. In this extraordinary circumstance, in which the church is prohibited from gathering physically to worship, the Confession grants liberty to the church in ordering its worship.

While the Confession prohibits private (or individual) reception of the sacrament (WCF, Chapter 29.4), the Constitution makes provision for individuals who want to participate in the sacrament but are not able to join the physical gathering due to circumstances beyond their control. *Book of Worship* 3-3G.1 provides for the celebration of the sacrament for those who are ill.

The person who is ill is not physically able to be present to participate in the sacrament due to circumstances beyond his or her control. It is not ideal to administer the Lord’s Supper individually for the sick. But it is better than depriving them of the spiritual nourishment and growth that results from participating.

In this extraordinary and temporary circumstance, the church finds itself in the same situation. It is not able to physically meet to worship due to circumstances beyond its control. While not ideal, a church may decide it is better in the midst of this crisis to offer the sacrament for the spiritual nourishment and growth of its members.

Instructions for a virtual administration of the Lord’s Supper

Churches that decide to celebrate the sacrament as part of a virtual worship service should:



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PROVISIONAL OPINION

1. Take special care to give instructions for the proper and reverent preparation of the elements beforehand, as well as of unused elements at the conclusion of the sacrament.
2. Take special care to introduce the sacrament in the worship service with affirmations of our Reformed understanding of it: the spiritual presence of Christ in the sacrament, the spiritual nourishment and encouragement it provides, the status of the elements used, fencing the table, self-examination, etc.

Conclusion

The Permanent Judicial Commission reviewed this provisional opinion and recommended to the 40th General Assembly that it be sustained (*Book of Government* 21-3D.1.b.). The recommendation was approved on September 18, 2020, by vote of the Assembly.