“Upon this Rock I Will Build My Livestream”: Reflections on Ecclesiological Emergencies

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With the arrival of COVID-19, governments and businesses went on lockdown in mid-March of 2020. In the U.S., it was to be for two weeks, to “flatten the curve” and allow the infection to spread through the population more gradually. It was unprecedented, but most churches agreed and locked their doors. For the first time in their lifetimes, healthy believers were barred from assembling for worship. But the weeks turned into months. In most places, worship assemblies came to be prohibited by local governments, and the vast majority of churches complied.

Churches at large faced a new crisis, and the crisis seemed particularly acute in Churches of Christ. As John Mark Hicks observes, “It has been said that Churches of Christ have three ‘sacraments:’ Baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the Lord’s Day or assembly.”[1] During COVID, weekly Eucharist, or Lord’s Supper, and the Lord’s Day assembly, crucial to the traditional identity of Churches of Christ and so many other fellowships, were severely threatened. The new situation called for a new set of emergency procedures in the face of lockdowns. Christians tuned in to watch livestream videos of worship activities and participate as they were able from home. Believers partook of their own bread and cup, physically administered to oneself or by another presider within

[1] John Mark Hicks, Johnny Melton, and Bobby Valentine, *A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter* (Abilene: Leafwood, 2007), 10, also citing Thomas Campbell to similar effect, sans “sacramental” language.

the household. The very fact that adaptive measures were taken testifies to the importance of observing the Lord's Day assembly and Lord's Supper.

Inasmuch as the body of Christ is flesh and in the world, it is subject to the contingencies and changes of time, place, and culture. God's people must therefore adapt creatively and faithfully to the circumstances, especially if there is not a clear word from the Lord. Such adaptations are hinted at in the New Testament itself. For example, Paul's church plant in Corinth encountered a circumstance not addressed in Jesus' recorded teachings: a new believer who is in a marriage to an unbeliever. In this instance, Paul, not the Lord, speaks (1 Cor 7:12). Further, Paul "thinks" a certain course of action "to be good because of the present necessity" (1 Cor 7:26). As the gospel spreads and endures, new situations arise. Paul is not changing the gospel, but he is applying it in new situations—in these cases, perhaps less than ideal situations.

How have the three so-called "sacraments" fared in the face of less than ideal circumstances?

Baptism

Presumably not very long after Jesus commissioned his disciples to go forth in order to make new disciples and to baptize (Matt 28:19), some eager evangelist had a hard time practicing the last command. It is not that he was defiant or flippant about Jesus' instructions. Rather, he was evangelizing in a dry region of the Middle East, and there simply was not enough water for immersion—the meaning of *baptisma*.[2] What would he do? Would he leave the new convert high and dry?

Before we pass judgment too quickly and think that, if it were important enough, this evangelist would find a way, it may be that modern convenience has compromised our sympathy with his plight. I do not work in a desert, but as I now sit and write during a typically dry summer, I am nearly ten miles away from a reliable body of water that is not man-made. Those ten miles as the crow flies are over twelve by road. In a time when nearly everyone had to

[2] That early Christian baptism was practiced as immersion is uncontroversial among historians. In his description of baptism in the early church, for example, Robert Louis Wilken writes, "As for method, baptism was always by full immersion in water, not sprinkling or pouring." *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 33.

walk to their destination, a 25-mile round trip for a baptism was a near impossibility. In any given place in the ancient Near Eastern desert, what might the distance to sufficient water be?[3]

In the canonical Gospels, Jesus said to baptize, but he did not specify in what kind of water, nor did he indicate what to do when there is not enough water, an actual situation that required a practical solution. These questions are addressed, however, in the *Didache [Teaching]*, whose content if not composition goes back to the first century, making it the oldest Christian document outside the New Testament. The *Didache* was "written in a time of transition and its author is clearly making an effort to harmonize ancient and revered traditions of the church with new ecclesial necessities."[4] In this specific case, if there is not ample water for an immersion, the author writes, then "pour out water on the head three times in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit."[5] This permission to pour water is the earliest recorded exception to immersion. In the context of the *Didache*, the exemption seems to be as much description as prescription.

In Scripture, there is precedent for finding alternatives when material necessity makes obedience to a liturgical command impossible or extremely difficult. For instance, although the Lord commands an altar of earth to be used for sacrifice, he immediately adds that it can also be an altar of stone (Exod 20:24–25). As for the sin offering, a sheep or a goat is to be sacrificed. But if the worshiper cannot afford one, then two birds may be offered. And if two birds are not affordable, then an offering of flour is acceptable (Lev 5:6–7, 11). Exceptions are possible for those who need them; a rich man should not be offering flour. That liturgical or ritual exceptions may be made in extreme circumstances seems clear, so it should not be too surprising that, in the early church, an alternative to immersion was suggested when immersion was in fact impossible.

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[3] This scarcity perhaps explains in part the excitement of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, and the immediacy of the baptism, upon finding sufficient water alongside the road (Acts 8:36–38).

[4] Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 3.

[5] *Didache* 7:3, in Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). The translation is my own.

In the intervening centuries, affusion (pouring) became such a well-known alternative to immersion that it may not occur to ask: why this solution? When faced with the predicament of insufficient water, why did the early church substitute this practice and not something else? Or why substitute at all—why not let the form of words suffice? First, it is important to know that early Christians—at least those living in Syria or Palestine whose practice is reflected in the *Didache*—believed these instructions to be from Jesus Christ and mediated through the apostles. The longer title of the document is *The Teaching [Didache] of the Lord through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations*. These hitherto exclusively oral teachings (later written down) were understood to be apostolic tradition, ultimately derived from Jesus himself, and therefore authoritative. Their putative dominical origin was reason enough for these instructions to get a hearing.[6]

In addition, other considerations probably contributed to the early church's choice of affusion. Since the very word *baptism* means immersion, if a tangible substance were to remain essential to the rite, then it is sensible that water would be used, and as much as possible. In a region deprived of many natural pools or deep rivers, well water would have been more available and dependable year round. Thus it is not one droplet that is called for. In other words, if one cannot be immersed in a bath of running water, then a shower is a reasonable alternative.

Finally, the "pouring out" of water alludes—intentionally or unintentionally—to some passages in Scripture that connect the gift of the Holy Spirit to a liquid poured out. Three times in Acts 2, the Spirit is said to have been "poured out" (*ekcheo*) on the believers (Acts 2:17-18, 33), a gift that is open to all through repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38). It is the same word (*ekcheo*) used in *Didache*. The liquid metaphor or symbolism is consistent with the precedent in the Old Testament prophets, which connects the pouring of water with the Holy Spirit (for example, Isa 44:3–5).

In the early church, the permission to pour water in the extreme case of a water shortage was expanded in the third century to cases of "clinical"

[6] *Pace* Niederwimmer, *Didache*, 56–57, who argues that the text itself does not lay claim to apostolic authority or have any such self-understanding. On the contrary, a first-century writer or compiler who wrote with such confidence likely assumed the apostolic origin of the content, and whoever later added "apostles" to the title reflected that same understanding.

baptism. If someone on a bed (*kline*) of sickness or of death requested baptism but physically could not make the journey, pouring water came to be permitted. Cyprian discusses such a scenario and defends *aspersio* (sprinkling) "when necessity compels," though his defense indicates that it was not an uncontroversial position.[7]

In light of the situations described above, the practice of pouring water may be regarded as theologically sensitive, reasonable, even biblical. The emergency procedure, moreover, testifies to the importance of the original ideal. In the absence of adequate water, the early Christians did not simply forego the water rite or suggest that the words alone would suffice. To worry about pouring water three times in the name of the Trinity points to the high value placed on water baptism and on the form of words accompanying it, as well as the essential role of it all in Christian initiation. The emergency was not intended to undermine but to preserve the ideal.

Despite the best intentions of the first generation, however, the emergency formula gradually supplanted the original ideal. It is not difficult to imagine how the transition could occur. If 25 miles round trip is too far for a disabled person to walk to find ample water for immersion, and affusion is permissible, then what about a ten-mile trip for someone who has a mere limp? If sprinkling "counts" for a person on her deathbed, then what about for the person who is sick with a moderate fever? If it is frigid outside, then pouring water surely would be better than dunking. Thus, over the course of the next millennium, pouring and later sprinkling became the typical mode of baptism in the Western Church. In the case of baptism, as in many other areas, what begins as an emergency method "when necessity compels" easily develops into the new norm for the sake of convenience. The original practice becomes inconvenient and then obsolete.

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[7] For primary-source quotations and commentary, including the passage from Cyprian's *Epistle* 75, on early Christian exceptions to immersion, see Everett Ferguson, *Early Christian Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries*, rev. ed. (Abilene: ACU Press, 1987), 45–54. The other famous exception to baptism in the early church was in the extreme situation of persecution. A catechumen (a believer who was being instructed in the faith in preparation for baptism) who confessed Christ at the cost of his life was considered to have been baptized in blood, a retroactive exemption. On the baptism of blood, see Bryan M. Litfin, *Early Christian Martyr Stories: An Evangelical Introduction with New Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 104–5 n. 17.

Lord's Day

As the months went by in 2020, churches reopened their doors to a very different situation. The virus lingered, and so did the emergency procedures. For some believers, the livestream or podcast has remained the new normal. For many who have returned to the physical assembly, individualized, self-administered communion remains the practice, as do the physical barriers of distance and masks.

The reality of the post-pandemic or reopened church raises several questions that can be better answered in hindsight. First of all, were these emergency procedures sound? With regard to the assembly, it seems reasonable to suggest that, in a situation of mandated lockdowns, the use of livestreaming and teleconferencing technology was a good short-term solution. In the absence of physical presence, to see and hear worship leaders through a screen is a sensible option. Alternatively, a family or household could conduct their own worship without the aid of electronic media. Many families experimented with both or even a mixture of the two.

These alternative practices of the Lord's Day do not reflect their fullness, of course. But they were always imperfect and incomplete in the pre-pandemic larger assembly, too. We are not yet physically with the saints in the eschatological kingdom. It is all an anticipation of a better day of worship without pain, sin, sickness, or death. Our situation is not ideal, so emergency procedures must be implemented.

The real question is how we regard and treat those emergency procedures. Society in general and churches in particular must carefully assess the new practices that emerged during the pandemic. And then a distinction may be made between, on the one hand, good practices that should be continued and, on the other hand, emergency procedures that, though they were necessary at the time and many people have now become accustomed to them, should not become the norm. The language and handling of the things in the latter category should reflect that these are less than ideal circumstances and only temporary solutions.

The problem is that such emergency procedures, although received reluctantly at first, quickly became customary, and the language used to describe them was less that of a stopgap measure than of normalization and therefore

permanence. These alternatives, as substitutes for the Lord's Day assembly and the Lord's Supper, are certainly convenient, which is why there is such a risk that they will become the new normal.

First, consider what was proposed as the conventional substitute for the assembly: sleeping in and staying home to watch TV on a Sunday morning. Although it was done with good intentions, it does not take much imagination to see how that could go wrong and lead to a high rate of attrition. Rather than emphasizing that it was a temporary, emergency solution and that people who are comfortable going to the grocery store and restaurants should also be comfortable in the pew, many churches instead indiscriminately reassured members who stayed home. The key word here is "indiscriminately." To be sure, the aged and those with co-morbidities were more justified in staying away from all crowds—whether at a grocery store, restaurant, or church assembly. But to the degree that churches encouraged members to stay away from the assembly—without distinguishing various risks or mentioning involvement in other activities—these same churches all but guaranteed that they would permanently lose members to those other activities. It is analogous to an ancient evangelist, with a river in full view one hundred yards away, telling an able-bodied candidate to sit tight because he has a jug of water ready for pouring. The author of the *Didache* would be horrified that the extraordinary stopgap has become the ordinary practice, though his successors over a millennium later would more likely regard the decision as reasonable.

It is necessary to assess the practice of church as livestream or podcast. The advantages during a time of lockdown and lingering pandemic are obvious. Livestream is a reasonable alternative to not meeting at all, and it ought to remain an alternative precisely for those individuals who, for health reasons, cannot assemble. The church has always had shut-ins. These are not people who go out to eat or attend concerts. Rather, they are people who, because of advanced age or other severe medical challenges, find it extremely difficult or dangerous to leave home and do so rarely and almost always for medical visits or necessities. In addition to shut-ins, there are some who must work a job whose hours are inflexible. The livestream should remain accessible and well-executed for them. The livestream should never have been for the healthy young person for whom the Lord's Day assembly seems to be the only social restriction.

Should churches continue to publicize their liturgy on the internet, that is, to make it available to all beyond the borders of the local congregation? Some churches did this already before COVID. Most churches do it now. Again, there are advantages to continuing the practice. For instance, many churches testify to the people reached and eventually even brought to Christ in faraway places through the livestreamed worship. The church should always be ready to employ technology in a way that enhances the work of the kingdom and glorifies God. At the same time, ours is a technophiliac age, which means we tend to be enamored with technology, to see only its potential benefits, and to use it without restriction and with no questions asked. In light of this reality, as part of the present assessment, it would be prudent to consider potentially negative consequences, some of which churches have already witnessed. The following points are raised not as premises in a decisive argument—much less as a bludgeon against a church that decides to livestream—but as points worth considering and addressing as churches move forward to mainstream the livestream. These points relate to a livestream intended both for members of the local congregation as well as for the broad, global public, an audience distinction that is difficult to maintain and may be functionally meaningless once the content is in cyberspace.

First of all, the church is, by definition, an assembly of people. The ancient Greek *ekklesia* was an assembly of persons "called out" from their private spheres of home and work, gathered for a political or civic purpose. The early Christian appropriation of this word expresses an essential aspect of Christian identity—namely, a people called out from their private lives, gathered together for a liturgical purpose.[8] As Hans Küng explains, "Ekklesia, like 'congregation', means both the actual *process of congregating* and the *congregated community* itself…. It becomes an ekklesia by the fact of a repeated concrete event, people coming together and congregating, in particular congregating for the purpose of worshipping God."[9] Likewise, Stanley Grenz observes, "We may

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[8] We should avoid the etymological fallacy, on which see, e.g., Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 130. At the same time, an assembly of people is gathered or called forth *from* elsewhere *for* a purpose. In addition to the Greek usage, Ed Gallagher reminds us of the Hellenistic Jewish usage of *ekklesia* in LXX (see his article in this issue).

[9] Hans Küng, *The Church* (Garden City: Image Books, 1976), 120.

appropriately speak of the church as being 'gathered to worship.'"[10] Everett Ferguson finds the great number of passages in the New Testament about Christians coming together to be "impressive."[11] It is hard to be the church (*ekklesia*)—which means a congregation of people—by oneself, at least on a recurring basis.

Besides church, another prominent Pauline metaphor for the people of God is body. One body has many parts or members, and the whole body is greater than the sum of its parts and can accomplish things that any member by itself could not (1 Corinthians 12; Eph 4:11–16). Paul contrasts the one body of Christ with individual, separated members. Those single members are part of the body inasmuch as they are connected with it and working together with it. The body (Latin, *corpus*) is, in contrast to its individual members, a *corporate* reality. It is hard to be the body, a functioning corporate entity, if it has been dismembered.

In his discussion of the variety of early Christian metaphors used to describe the covenant people of God, Everett Ferguson notes, "What is immediately evident in these images for the church is that they all emphasize the *communal* aspect of Christian faith and life."[12] Like other metaphors used to describe God's covenant people, church and body imply literal togetherness. That bond of unity, however, becomes a more abstract metaphor as one considers the people of God around the world and throughout the ages. In other words, one may object that physical presence is not needed to unite believers who are physically separated. But that physical separation is also a less than ideal situation experienced this side of the eschaton. It is mitigated by believers joining together on a regular basis in a smaller, local instantiation of that church catholic and body universal, participating as one in the same spiritual food and drink as God's people of all times and places.

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[10] Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 638. Cf. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 137–39.

[11] Ferguson, *Church of Christ*, 232.

[12] Everett Ferguson, ed., *Understandings of the Church*, Ad Fontes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 3. They include "body of Christ, bride of Christ, family, house and sanctuary, people of God, and 'the earth and all that is in it.'" His summary of early Christian metaphors is found in ibid., 1–20. For an analysis of the various terminology and metaphors used in the New Testament, see Ferguson, *Church of Christ*, 71–134.

The body metaphor also reflects the centrality of the incarnation, for the church is not just any body—it is the body of Christ. When the Word became flesh (John 1:14), it was something to be heard, seen, and touched (1 John 1:1). The spiritual connection among the body's members is important, but it is incomplete without physical connection. The body of Christ is something to be heard, seen, and touched. Mediated through screens, the members of the body are presented to one another as disembodied, virtual selves. This increased tendency to experience life, including its most important realities, through screens, is consistent with Charles Taylor's observation that "we relate to the world as more disembodied beings than our ancestors" and that ours is an "excarnational" age.[13]

For an emergency when absence is necessary, teleconferencing technology is a reasonable substitute for physical presence. As presence, though heard and seen, it is a disembodied presence. Paul's letters functioned as his vicarious presence, but they paled in comparison to his bodily presence, indicated by the longing, repeatedly expressed, to see his fellow believers in person (Rom 1:11–12; 15:23–29, 32; 1 Cor 11:34; 2 Cor 1:15–16; 7:6–7, 13; 1 Thess 2:17–18). Physical presence is simply more effective for communicating and expressing the truth and implications of the gospel.[14]

What humans understand intuitively about the importance of physical presence is also reinforced by sociological analysis. In his book on interaction and ritual, Randall Collins emphasizes the necessity of bodily presence for ritual. Could "a wedding ceremony or a funeral be conducted over a telephone?" he asks. "The very idea seems inappropriate."[15] Collins wrote this book long before the coronavirus pandemic and the widespread teleconferencing that combines audio and video. But, in light of the television broadcasts of religious services, Collins writes, "Broadcast religious services do not displace personal attendance, but reinforce and enhance it…. Distance media can provide some

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[13] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 141, 288, 614–15.

[14] Even when Paul seems to prefer an epistle to a physical visit, it is because the visit is so much more effective than a letter in inflicting pain (2 Cor 1:23–2:4; 13:1–2, 10).

[15] Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 54. Channeling Collins, Robert N. Bellah reiterates the same point in *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 278–79, 658 n. 36.

of the sense of shared attention and emotion, which give a feeling of attraction, membership, and respect. The strongest effects are reserved, however, for full bodily assembly."[16] Collins acknowledges that, in the future, there may be an increase in the use of distance media as physical presence succumbs to economic or practical pressures. Still, he predicts, "The more that human social activities are carried out by distance media, at low levels of IR [interaction ritual] intensity, the less solidarity people will feel; the less respect they will have for shared [symbolic] objects; and the less enthusiastic personal motivation they will have in the form of EE [emotional energy]."[17]

The livestreamed worship should be seen exactly for what it is—an ersatz. The emergency procedure ought to be executed well for those who need it: the local sick and shut-in members, those who must work an hourly job during the assembly, and those who reside in a faraway place. Those in another county, state, or country—including those who came to Christ via the livestream—should be encouraged to find and connect with a local body of believers, even as they continue to benefit from viewing the distant livestream. The ideal is to meet with the assembled body. Short of that possibility, churches that provide a livestream would be wise to regard it as a stopgap measure. It is not a practice of convenience for someone who has supplanted the Lord's Day assembly with something of subordinate importance. If church history, both ancient and recent, has taught anything, it is that the matter of convenience is a genuinely slippery slope.

An important aspect of regarding the livestream as an emergency measure is simply to treat it as such. This treatment is reflected principally in the language used about it. For example, it may seem subtle, but there is a vast difference between, on the one hand, "For those who cannot be here, we hope you are blessed by tuning in online, but we also hope you can join us in person soon," and, on the other hand, "We are so happy that you are worshiping online. Watching the livestream is just as good. Staying home does not indicate a lack of faithfulness. No one is to judge," and the like. The latter set of words does not sound like emergency stopgap language, yet something like it has been

[16] Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 60.

[17] Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, 64. Collins notes (ibid., 54) that these levels generated by interactive media can be studied experimentally. His entire section on bodily presence (53–64) is worth reading and relevant to my point here.

heard in many churches. For many months, well-intentioned church leaders urged members to stay home and to feel good about it. Before COVID, I have never known a church that felt compelled to tell people who were truly sick or unable to attend that their absence was permissible; it was never questioned. Whom exactly were churches now reassuring with these new messages that absence is good? Was that message for the feeble and frail or for the fearful and indolent? It seems possible that, in some circumstances and for some people, forsaking the assembly could indeed indicate or contribute to a lack of faithfulness. At any rate, language goes a long way in shaping perception.

Another way to reinforce the subordinate status of the livestream, even for all the good it may do, is never to allow it to shape the assembly itself in a meaningful way, especially in a way that is inexpedient to the aims of the in-person assembly. That is, "production value" should not be a leading concern of those planning and leading worship, particularly if it gets in the way of the people actually present. For instance, if the liturgy calls for a time of quiet reflection and confession free from distraction while the production team is asking how it looks on TV, or if the preacher is told not to walk off the podium toward the congregation because the lighting is bad, then perhaps the priorities are imbalanced. What if the church spontaneously gathers around in a tight circle for prayer, but the event sends the cameramen scrambling for a good angle? Will it impede the ones praying to hear a drone hovering above them? Or what if something very personal—such as confession of sin or mention of a health matter—needs to be brought before the assembly? Will the fact that it is broadcast around the globe impede openness in person?

The medium is the message, and Christian worship—like family Thanksgiving dinner or Christmas morning—is not meant for the TV. Imagine a family member asking, "Now how will this look on TV?" It's one thing to film the kids opening gifts, but quite another to order them to wear photogenic clothing, sit in predetermined spots, and make constant eye contact with the camera. If that is to become the norm in worship, we will have lost something sacred in the process. With deepest respect and gratitude to technology teams for their professional and selfless service in churches, Socrates was correct: No technology team should be making decisions about the use of the technology.[18]

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[18] Plato *Phaedrus* 274E, trans. Harold North Fowler, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), 562–63 (translation modified): "Most

The livestream can and should be done well, but the tail mustn't wag the dog. The media broadcast mustn't dictate what happens in the assembly.[19]

For these reasons, and many more, the old adage rings true: *unus Christianus nullus Christianus* (one Christian is no Christian). Hicks sums up well the importance of the assembling of the saints:

> The assembly shapes communal identity, forms a concrete manifestation of the body of Christ as community, empowers discipleship and sustains the people of God as they are nourished by divine presence. Assembling—whenever or wherever we assemble (not only on the Lord's Day)—is a means of grace, a transforming encounter.[20]

Lord's Supper

The phenomenon of drive-thru communion preceded the COVID pandemic by many years, and, at the time, most serious Christians were not persuaded. In 2014, National Public Radio reported on a drive-in church in Daytona Beach.[21] In the style of a drive-in theater, members pulled up in their cars to watch the proceedings, the bread and wine served in pre-packaged kits. As the reporter noted, "Liturgical purists might balk at a worship style in which even Communion isn't very communal." She added, "Those who want human interaction can then gather in the fellowship hall." Fellowship, it would seem, is an unnecessary addition to the worship assembly and its central act. Most observers were not aware that the practices balked at in 2014 would lay the groundwork for what became mainstream in 2020—holy communion without human interaction.

When churches were closed to the public, some chose to abstain from the Eucharist altogether. For Roman Catholics and others who might believe the elements must be consecrated and served or administered in person by the

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artistic (*technikotate*) Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts (*technes*), but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another."

[19] For a classic statement of what television did to culture, see Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Penguin, 2005). On the relationship to worship in particular, see 114–24.

[20] Hicks, et al., *A Gathered People*, 16.

[21] Amy Kiley, "Roadside Service: Drive-In Church Brings God to Your Car," at https://www.npr.org/2014/03/03/285278319/roadside-service-drive-in-church-brings-god-to-your-car.

rightly ordained bishop or priest, then perhaps abstention is necessary.[22] But for my family, when we heard the words of institution via the livestream, and then we repeated those words in my family room, I believe that whatever happens in the Eucharist was in fact happening, and so we kept the feast. In emergencies, you still practice the sacraments as able. Even Roman Catholics allow that, in emergencies, a layman can administer baptism. The *Didache*'s affusion, the martyr's baptism of blood—these all "count," that is, God bestows the benefits. The church never said, if you cannot baptize in the preferred way, then abstain from baptism. So, rather than abstain from Eucharist, one may recognize that self-administration is an emergency situation—not ideal—but it is better than nothing.

The stopgap may have been permissible, but something was missing. As with the language of *church* and *body*, one of the essential aspects of the Eucharist is reflected in the terminology of *communion* (1 Cor 10:16). Like worship in general, the Lord's Supper is communion on two levels—with God and with fellow believers. Thus, by definition, communion is to be done with others. The word *koinonia*, typically translated as *communion* in 1 Corinthians 10, means fellowship and sharing. One cannot easily share and have fellowship alone.

The convenience of allowing the shut-in to self-administer the Eucharist should not keep the congregation from ministering to them. That is, reliance on the livestream could be used as a justification for depriving the chronically sick or infirm of the blessing of physical human presence. The solution, from at least the second century, was for the church to send the Christian community to the shut-in—namely, for the deacons to bring the Lord's Supper to the unavoidably absent.[23] If today's church would deliver communion and community—with hygienic precautions—to the doorstep or living room of those who cannot attend, the truly infirm would be built up and perhaps the others who really can attend would return when they see how they are loved and missed.

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[22] For a well-stated argument in this direction, see Brad East, "Sacraments, Technology, and Streaming Worship in a Pandemic," *Mere Orthodoxy* (April 2, 2020), at https://mereorthodoxy.com/churches-livestream-public-worship/.

[23] Justin Martyr, *1 Apology* 67, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, The Fathers of the Church (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), 107.

But communion has not quite returned to normal even for the people meeting again in person. Upon return to the assembly, most churches have retained the individual packets. It remains, then, a self-serving and self-administered Eucharist. In many churches, an ordained priest serves the participants. In other churches, the body of believers carries out that priestly duty by passing the tray and serving one another. In both cases, there is the give and take of mutual sharing, the speaking of redemptive words to one another. The individual packet, however, removes the opportunity for what little horizontal communion actually took place during the Lord's Supper. In addition, what most churches have provided during the pandemic stretches the meaning of the words edible and potable, a fact that should have guaranteed the packet's transience.[24] These are temporary measures for times of crisis. For churches that deem it necessary to continue this emergency practice, perhaps they could take advantage of the unity expressed when everyone waits and takes the elements simultaneously as one body. Such a practice could transcend the exigencies of the moment and proclaim truth long after the emergency and its other procedures have passed.

Conclusion

The "present necessity" of the coronavirus pandemic has called for certain emergency procedures in society at large and in the church. Christian leaders, traveling in uncharted territory, implemented new practices with the best of intentions to preserve both the physical and spiritual health of God's people. That challenge proved formidable. But now is the time to look back and take stock of what happened in order to move forward.

It is first of all important simply to acknowledge the category of ecclesiological emergency and the status of the solutions that are proposed. If some Christians are inclined to be critical of substitutes for immersion, then they should be equally skeptical about the ease with which their own churches have introduced innovations into the assembly and communion.

But it may be that some emergency procedures are so radical that they strike at the very heart of the sacramental concept. *Ekklesia* and *koinonia*, like *baptisma*, mean something. If the assembly is done without assembling and if

[24] I refer to the Styrofoam wafer and grape-flavored drink. Their container—more precisely, the action of prying it open—is also not conducive to the liturgical ambience.

communion is observed without communing, it differs little from immersion being practiced without immersing. Stopgaps are sometimes necessary. But if the temporary substitute is continued unnecessarily, then the stopgap becomes the norm and the church risks forever losing something meaningful.

And so the church would be wise to consider principles for emergency practices, both for this pandemic and for any future unforeseen crises. I suggest the following for starters. Any development forced on the church because of external contingencies and exigencies should be directed in such a way to reflect as far as possible the ideal—biblically, theologically, and functionally. New practices that arise must be evaluated and distinguished into two categories. On the one hand, those stopgap measures that are less than ideal—especially those that the church at large would have loathed to implement before the crisis—must be treated and spoken about in such a way that they are understood by the church to be temporary, less than ideal, and therefore dispensable. They should never be allowed to supplant the ideal and become the norm. On the other hand, some practices that arise during a crisis could turn out to be better liturgical expressions of biblical and theological truth and have better practical outcomes. Such practices may be valued for what they contribute, and therefore they ought to be retained. If the outward forms do not correspond to inward realities, or if those outward forms fulfill no theological or ecclesiological function, then perhaps they can be exchanged for something else.

May God grant to his church wisdom, in the midst of social chaos and political confusion, to distinguish between these two categories. And may God's people remain free and eager to come together in the "fullness of the blessing of Christ" (Rom 15:29).

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