

What about Communion when we cannot physically gather?

Stuart Sheehan, PhD

President and CEO of World Hope Ministries International

Director, World Hope Bible Institute

The following information is provided for students and graduates of World Hope Bible Institute. It is a summary of conversations I have had over the last two weeks with those wondering about observing Communion during a near global stay-at-home order.

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As much of the world is staying at home to slow the spread of COVID-19, many pastors are seeking to shepherd their flock in unfamiliar territory. As Christians are housebound and cannot gather, many churches have moved to a solely online presence. One of the issues facing many is how should they deal with Communion. Can they still observe Communion at home, without gathering as a congregation? If so, are there special things that ought to be considered? While I do not think it is necessarily wrong to take Communion in an 'online gathering,' I think there are questions that ought to be answered, things a pastor ought to consider before doing something that he regrets, or that communicates something that is untrue about the nature of the Church or Communion. Here are five questions that help me shape my own thinking.

- 1) Do extraordinary circumstances call for unusual means?
- 2) Is there any historical precedent for something like this?
- 3) How will you handle the pastoral responsibility of warning people not to take the Supper in an unworthy manner, and that you provide it only for those sheep that you reasonably know are walking in obedience to Christ?
- 4) Can you communicate that this is 'less than' Jesus wanted for us? In other words, how can you indicate that you are not establishing a new normal?
- 5) Can you use unusual means with a clear conscience without judging those who see it differently?

Below, are some of my thoughts on these questions.

- 1) Do extraordinary circumstances call for unusual means?

These are extraordinary days. The very nature of Christian community has been upended. This has left us looking for ways to serve in pastoral roles, while obeying the Scripture and honoring the authorities who are doing what they can to save lives. The fact that we are not gathering is something we do to show our care for others. For now, we stay home because the love of Christ compels us to do so. There are parts of our work as pastors, however, that are greatly hindered by this. Communion, as we have observed it, is currently not possible. Yet, it is a very important part of our collective spiritual life. It was established by Jesus for the purpose of remembering, proclaiming His death until He comes (1 Corinthians 11:24-26). While the frequency of celebrating Communion is not specified in Scripture, that it should be observed is unquestionable. Considering the current circumstances and the desire of Christians to remember and declare His death through Communion, perhaps unusual means are warranted.

2) Is there any historical precedent for something like this?

The life of the Church has spanned war, famine, disease and plague. That others have had to navigate difficulties is a comfort to those of us trying to figure out how to move forward. For example, in the Common Book of Prayer (1789), there is a section on providing Communion in times of plague. It tells the minister how to go about delivering Communion to a member who is sick, or how individuals in the congregation might observe Communion when they cannot come to take Communion together. It reads:

In the times of contagious sickness or disease, when none of the Parish or neighbours can be gotten to communicate with the sick in their houses, for fear of the infection, upon special request of the diseased, the Minister alone may communicate with him.

Granted, that is not the tradition of which I am a part, the Book of Common Prayer has been the guide for Anglicans for centuries. It does, however, illustrate that we are not the first to consider how we might best care for our congregation when they cannot congregate. This is just one example of many I could offer. Yes, there is historical warrant for adopting unusual means during extraordinary circumstances.

3) How will you handle the pastoral responsibility of warning people not to take the Supper in an unworthy manner, and that you provide it only for those sheep that you reasonably know are walking in obedience to Christ?

This is, perhaps, one of the most important questions you must face. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-30, Paul exhorts the church not to take the Supper in an unworthy manner, as it has produced sickness or death in some. His instruction for each person to examine himself is important. So, who is tasked with reminding the congregation to undertake this self-examination? I believe that is part of the pastoral role. In caring for his flock, the pastor should warn his people if they are about to engage in something that could incur the discipline of God. Simply broadcasting a Communion and inviting anyone to participate is problematic on two levels. First, the warning that should be given out may be omitted—that would be neglect on the part of the pastor. It also creates another problem. If a pastor provides Communion for anyone who wants to join in on Facebook, he is likely administering Communion to another shepherd's sheep. This would go against historical precedent of ensuring that those who take the Supper are in good standing in their local church. While I would welcome anyone who attests to being a member in good standing of another church (close Communion), I would not want to indicate that there are no constraints to participation. Both of these can be mitigated. First, if a pastor broadcasts a Communion service, he should make sure he encourages self-examination. Communion is not for someone who says, "I think I need some of that Christianity, so I will tune in and take the Supper." Second, I think a pastor should clearly state that he is offering Communion for those who are part of his flock. Others should be encouraged not to participate. I believe that in the best-case scenario, a live stream would be available only to those who are under the pastoral care of the pastor who is leading them. I realize that may not be possible. So further mitigation/communication may be needed.

- 4) Can you communicate that this is 'less than' Jesus wanted for us? In other words, how can you indicate that you are not establishing a new normal?

One of the ongoing concerns is that we are selling our congregations short if we advertise that gathering in a virtual sense is equivalent to gathering in person. This is not the case. If we are not lamenting the fact that we cannot be together, we are missing something very important. Incarnation is key to the nature of the gospel (Jesus came in the flesh), just as communality (physical togetherness) is key to the life of the church. To offer Communion in a virtual service is to do something 'less than' what Jesus intended. That does not make it inherently wrong, but it does mean that we should not sell it as 'just as good as the real thing.' If you choose to employ unusual means to observe Communion, congregants may get the wrong impression as to why you are doing so. Some may assume that Communion is needed to ensure that sins are forgiven, that the Supper is expiatory (needed for cleansing from sin). So, make sure you communicate that what is being done is 'less than' Jesus intended, and it is not being done because it is essential for members to have ongoing cleansing from sin (1 John 1:9-2:2). What a great opportunity this presents to teach on the true nature of Communion!

5) Can you do this with a clear conscience and not judge others who see it differently? In Romans 14, Paul provides some important guidance on how to navigate differing views of worship methods. I would encourage each of you to read the whole chapter before you proceed. There are two truths from this Chapter that I want to highlight. First, we should not pass judgement on those who will handle things differently than we. These are extraordinary times. None of us will get everything right—but we should all be striving to honor the Lord in what we do. Second, each person should be clear in his own conscience that what he is doing represents, as best as he understands, what God is asking of him. If it cannot be done with a clear conscience, it cannot be done in faith—therefore, it cannot please God.

However you navigate this, be deliberate. A hasty decision, without discretion, could have unhealthy outcomes. Study the Scripture and seek the Lord. Pray for the grace to lead well. And, if you err, there is grace for that as well. All of us at WHMI are praying for you during these days. You are dear to us.