

MEETING TOGETHER IN THE 21st CENTURY: EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITY
OF A VIRTUAL CONFSSIONAL LUTHERAN CONGREGATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the possibility and feasibility of a confessional Lutheran congregation existing virtually. This paper addresses three main issues surrounding a virtual congregation. These three areas are worship, community, and the Lord's Supper. This paper covers these three topics by turning first to what Scripture has to say about these three important issues. Once the Biblical principles at hand have been established, the paper will explore what the Lutheran confessions have to offer on the issues. Then, the paper will look at possible shortcomings that a virtual congregation may face in these areas, and finally the paper will look at possible solutions for how these issues might be solved virtually.

INTRODUCTION

Only a couple of years ago, the idea of a virtual congregation was something that most pastors and church goers rarely thought about. It was a seemingly futuristic or far-fetched idea for most established congregations. However, in a matter of weeks that all changed. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the United States into a lockdown. People gathering in groups was prohibited. Suddenly, churches that for years had been filled with worshippers every Sunday, were empty. Out of necessity, worship had to be done in a completely different way. Physical congregations had to become virtual.

When the country was put into lockdown, it caused many churches to have to experience virtual church for the first time. Instead of meeting in a normal worship space or gathering inside of a church building, congregations had to worship virtually. This meant that instead of sitting in a Pew worshipping in a sanctuary, people watched online services sitting on their couch while they worshipped in their homes. For many people this was the first time that they had ever experienced online worship. Suddenly, churches that had never even thought of having virtual worship were put into the position of having to try to come up with a way to have church services continue. For many pastors it was the first time that they had ever preached to a video camera rather than a room full of people. Church goers tuned into the service from their cell phones or computers by themselves or with only their immediate family rather than worshipping together with a congregation. Virtual Congregations went from being a novel idea to being something that every church goer had some experience with temporarily. It was an experience

born out of necessity, but what if a church was started with the goal of being a completely virtual congregation? Lutherans have always had a high regard for worship. It has always been the Lutheran church's mission to preach the gospel in Word and sacrament. This means that throughout the history of the Lutheran church, it has never been possible to have a virtual congregation. However, with the technology that is available to us today it is an option. It is an option that as it grows in popularity even WELS Lutherans could one day want. This paper will explore the possibility of a confessional Lutheran congregation going virtual. The question that this paper will attempt to answer is whether a Confessional Lutheran congregation can exist virtually.

PART I: VIRTUAL CONGREGATIONS

Defining a Virtual Congregation

The first step of deciding whether a virtual confessional Lutheran congregation is possible is defining what we mean when we use the term “virtual congregation.” One of the main issues with using this terminology in the word “virtual.” Webster’s Dictionary first definition for the word is “very close to being something without actually being it.”¹ Right away, this definition gives the impression that a virtual congregation is a congregation that is “not real.” This connotation makes the idea of a virtual congregation seem like an unwise practice merely because the definition of the word in many people’s minds, means unreal.

For the sake of defining what is meant by the term “virtual congregation,” it is useful to look at the second definition that Miriam Webster gives for the word virtual. The second definition is “existing or occurring on computers or on the Internet.”² This definition is more useful and appropriate for the term “virtual congregation.” As technology advances and brings us all closer together, it becomes harder to justify using the word “virtual” as a synonym for unreal. For example, when somebody talks to their mother over the phone, that person can say that they talked to their mother. The conversation that they had was real. The information they exchanged was real. The only difference between that conversation and having one face to face was the fact that it was done over the phone. However, the fact that it was over the phone does not make it

1. Miriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtual>

2. Miriam Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/virtual>

any less real of a conversation. It merely makes it different. Every day, technology is advancing and making the difference between a “virtual” conversation and a face-to-face conversation less significant. FaceTime, Skype, and Zoom are three examples of tools that can be used to video chat with someone from anywhere in the world. This technology makes it possible to not only hear the voice of someone else, but also see their face. Technology is making virtual interactions more real than ever before.

This technology also means that the differences between a virtual congregation that meets together online and a congregation that meets together physically are no longer as drastic as they once were. Technology opens new ways to tell others about Jesus. We can reach people from around the world with just a cell phone. As we move further into this technological age, “we are entering a new era that raises new questions and calls for new approaches. New technologies are now emerging that make possible social and religious movements of an unprecedented scale and complexity.”³ A virtual congregation is a real group of people who gather together to worship and to receive religious instruction. Instead of gathering in a church building, they meet online for worship and instruction.⁴

The use of technology to share God’s Word with people is nothing new. Throughout history, ministers of the gospel have used the technology available to reach as many people as they could. The apostle Paul wrote letters to communicate to churches that he could not be at

3. Bock, Darrell, and Jonathan Armstrong. *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2021. 25

4. Virtual congregations vary drastically. It can be a group of people from all over the world who gather for virtual worship, and every interaction that they have is done exclusively online. A virtual congregation can also be a localized congregation that does not have a church building. Many virtual congregations are formed in a localized area or city. This means that not every interaction is virtual. Pastors can still visit people in person, and often outreach is done in person. There could be a whole separate paper to explore the differences in practice that church bodies use to have virtual congregations. This paper will touch on a few of these methods, but it is by no means an exhaustive list of all the possibilities.

physically. Paul during his ministry, made use of the Roman roads that connected the entire Roman Empire during his missionary journeys. Martin Luther made use of the printing press to make his works widely available during the Reformation. These are just two examples of how technology can provide new opportunities to spread the gospel. For people living today the relatively new technology that can be used is the internet. It connects people in ways that were previously impossible. It is what makes a virtual congregation a possibility.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual congregations existed. It can seem like a virtual congregation is a brand-new idea since not many WELS churches had any experience with virtual worship until the pandemic. However, in their book, Darrel Bock and Jonathan Armstrong point out that for many Christians online worship has become a relatively normal thing when they say: “While experiencing our Christian life online or through computer tools still feels new for many of us, the reality is that for hundreds of millions of people, computer technology and the internet facilitate part of their daily religious experience.”⁵ To better explore the possibility of a virtual Lutheran congregation, we have to leave behind the idea that virtual automatically means “fake.” It is important to recognize that many Christians already use technology in their lives of worship and in their personal devotional lives. Whether it is watching a pastor who recorded a YouTube video of his sermon or listening to a devotional podcast, these are real ways that real Christians are encountering the Word of God.

5. Bock, Darrell, and Jonathan Armstrong. *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2021. 27

The Main Issues Surrounding Virtual Congregations

The concept of a virtual congregation does come with its own set of problems. There is no denying that even if we acknowledge that a virtual congregation can be a real congregation, it is still vastly different than a congregation that meets in person. Technology changes the way that we operate in our day to day lives. “Our technologies shape our sense of our world, our expectations, hopes, and fears, who we are as individuals and how we live together as a people.”⁶ Cars and planes transformed the way that we travel. Cellphones changed the way that we communicate. In the big picture of human history, these huge changes to our society happened relatively recently and in a small amount of time. People can communicate whenever they please with anyone around the world with the click of a mouse. These changes have influenced our culture. It means that the changes brought about in this technological age also have changed the way that we do ministry. These rapid changes can be beneficial, but they can also bring with them some cause for concern as well.

During my research on virtual congregations, I found that both people who were proponents of virtual congregations, and people who thought that the practice was unwise both addressed many of the same concerns about virtual worship. One of the things that was not a significant issue was the logistics of having virtual worship. That technology is there. People use a wide variety of technologies to have a virtual congregation. It can range from worship services held through a zoom meeting all the way to virtual reality churches. Both people who are for and

6. Knippa, Michael. 2016. “Features of Human Anatomy: Marshall McLuhan on Technology in the Global Village.” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24 (3): 375

who are against virtual worship say that it is possible to have an online congregation. However, they also share some of the same concerns about virtual worship.

This paper is going to cover three of the biggest issues that must be addressed when someone is deciding if it is possible to have a virtual congregation. These three issues are worship, community, and the Lord's Supper. These issues are important to any Christian denomination, but they are especially important for exploring whether a confessional Lutheran congregation can exist virtually. I am going to cover these three topics by turning first to what Scripture has to say about these three important issues. Once the Biblical principles at hand have been established, the paper will explore what the Lutheran confessions have to offer on the issues. Then, the paper will look at possible shortcomings that a virtual congregation may face in these areas, and finally the paper will look at possible solutions for how these issues might be addressed virtually.

PART II: WORSHIP

An important aspect of any confessional Lutheran congregation is how they carry out their worship practices. The Lutheran church has historically put a high value on public worship. Can a confessional Lutheran congregation worship virtually? One of the biggest differences between a virtual congregation and a congregation that meets in person every Sunday is the way that they gather for worship. This section of the paper will focus on what the Scriptural principles are to keep in mind when it come to virtual worship. It will also look at what the Lutheran confessions say about worship that can be applied to a virtual setting. Using these two sources as a guide the paper will explore what people have identified as possible shortcomings of worshipping virtually and ways that worship can remain edifying while being done virtually.

Scriptural Principles

In the Old Testament, God told his people how, when, and where they were to worship him. The Israelites worshipped at the temple or the tabernacle where God was present (Ex 40). They worshipped God by offering specific sacrifices to him (Lev 1-7). Even the times that they were to worship were commanded by God.⁷ There was a specific way that the Israelites had been commanded to worship God according to his law.

In the New Testament, the Christian church was not given a specific way to worship. Christ came into the world to fulfill the law. Paul points out what this means for Christian

7. Ex 35, Lev 16, Lev 23

worship in his letter to the Colossians: ““Therefore, do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Col 2:16-17 NIV). Christians now have freedom in the way that they worship God. The Old Testament laws about worship were intended to show the separation that there was between God’s people and the rest of the world. The Israelites worshipped at the temple, but they were not allowed inside where God was. Even the high priest was only allowed to enter the Holy of Holies one day a year on the day of atonement. It showed the separation that there was between the Holy God and sinners. The priest needed to intercede for the people to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. The sacrifices day after day showed his people that there was a price that needed to be paid for sin.

Jesus changed all of that. Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for sinners (Heb 7:26-27). He is our great high priest (Heb 4:14). Believers are able to worship God in freedom because of what Christ has done. Jesus addresses how his life and death changed the way that God’s people worship him. While he was talking to a Samaritan woman at a well, he says: “Believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth” (John 4:21-23). Worship was no longer tied to a specific location or even a specific physical practice anymore. God’s people could now worship in the Spirit.

Christ’s payment for sin and his resurrection from the dead has declared all people justified in God’s sight this means that believers are able to come into his presence. Peter writes

about how believers' status has changed when he says: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:4-5). Believers are God's holy priesthood. The entire life of a believer is worship to God. Believers live lives of thanks and praise for what God has done for them.

That does not mean that New Testament never gathered to worship God together. The early Christian church did worship. They gathered to hear God's Word and to pray together (Acts 2:42-47). Public worship was still important. The apostle Paul urges believers to worship together when he says: "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:16-17). He encourages believers to praise God together as they live in the light of his grace. Public worship is encouraged. It is why a virtual congregation should have a desire to gather for public worship even if it takes place online.

The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament no longer apply to God's people. However, that does not mean that there is not reverence when believers gather to worship God. The writer to the Hebrews says: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:28). Even though we have been freed from sin there should still be a reverence when we become before the Holy God in worship. Worship is not something to be taken lightly. Virtual worship could more easily lend itself to a more laid back and casual

attitude towards worship. Logging onto a Zoom meeting is different than walking into a church building that is set up to focus the worshipper's attention on being in the presence of God. It means that a virtual congregation will have to work and find ways to retain reverence during online worship.

Confessions on Worship

The Lutheran confessions have a high regard for worship. They point out what makes worship valid. The *Augsburg Confession* states: "At whatever time God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read or pondered, there the person, the day, and the work is hallowed, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word that makes us all saints."⁸ It is the Word that makes worship effective. It is the Word that builds Christians up. It is the Word that gives worship its meaning. It is not the act of the people carrying the worship service or the act of worshipping.

This is why God has called workers for his church. "So that we may obtain the faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the Sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel"⁹ God want's his people to worship him he wants them to hear his word and to celebrate the sacraments. That is why God has called people to carry out this work in his church. A pastor of a virtual church has the same task as the pastor of a conventional church. He is to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments!

8. Kolb, Robert, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. LC I 92. All future citations of the Lutheran Confessions will come from this Kolb/Wengert edition)

9. AC V. 1-3

In carrying out this divine call the called worker is free to choose how to carry out that task. “It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere.”¹⁰ The best choice for public worship is going to vary from location to location. Virtual worship is not invalid worship just because it is new. It may be different, but it does not mean that it is not real. The Augsburg Confession also says that there is something else to keep in mind when choosing which practices to use: “Concerning church rites, they teach that those rites should be observed that can be observed without sin and that contribute to peace and good order in the church, for example, certain holy days, festivals, and the like.”¹¹ Worship needs to be done in such a way that it continually builds up the kingdom of God while also ensuring good order in the congregation.

It is this purpose that drives the confession’s statements on worship practices. Melancthon writes: “Ceremonies should be observed both so that people may learn the Scriptures and so that, admonished by the Word, they might experience faith and fear and finally even pray. For these are the purposes of the ceremonies.”¹² Public worship needs to be done with this purpose as the primary force behind the decisions of which practices to use. Whether virtually or in person worship needs to be intentional. This is what makes worship beautiful. “The true adornment of the church is godly, useful, and clear doctrine, the devout use of the sacraments, ardent prayer, and the like. Candles, golden vessels, and similar adornments are appropriate, but they are not the distinctive adornment of the church.”¹³

10. AC VII. 3

11. AC XV. 1

12. AP XXIV 3

13. AP XXIV. 51

Possible Shortcomings of Virtual Worship

Virtual worship does still have its challenges. It is so much different than the way that Lutheran churches have worshipped for years. One of the main issues that needs to be addressed is what a church is communicating simply by having virtual worship. Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “The medium is the message.” McLuhan was a Canadian philosopher who “With this pithy phrase, sought fundamentally to draw attention to what he felt was chronically and routinely ignored: the importance and effect of mediums (technologies) themselves, irrespective of the content they are conveying.”¹⁴

McLuhan himself said about the medium with which we choose to communicate: “The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology is reshaping and restructuring pattern of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing US to reconsider and reevaluate practically everything we thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing-you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to “others.” And they’re changing dramatically.”¹⁵ McLuhan all the way back in the sixties what he thought the technological future would mean. He essentially predicted the internet even though he did not call it that. He used the term “global village” He saw predicted that this technology would change the way we see the world.

14. Knippa, Michael. 2016. “Features of Human Anatomy: Marshall McLuhan on Technology in the Global Village.” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24 (3): 373.

15. Marshall McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967). This book is composed in a non-traditional format and has no assigned page numbers.

He was right. The internet has changed the way that we interact with the world. His phrase “the medium is the message” is still relevant today. What is it that a church is communicating by holding worship virtually just by the medium itself? Many opponents of virtual worship are of the opinion that it’s a dangerous precedent to set. Jared Wilson writes:

It is not a good idea in our consumer age to un-incarnate anything. The virtual world of technology and social media have stunted the Western imagination and inhibited our ability to experience the fullness of relationships and vibrant community. It doesn’t make sense to virtualize something so important to the life of a church as the Word of God preached. It implicitly communicates that presence isn’t important.¹⁶

Even without intending it, a virtual church could give the impression that worship is not as important as it is.

Another argument against virtual worship is that the church is all about Jesus. In order to save sinners Jesus took on human flesh. Jesus clearly thought that presence was something that was important. “The relationship that God experiences with His creation in the incarnation is fundamentally different from the relationship that we experience as physical and spiritual beings when we interact with digital technology.”¹⁷ This line of thought is something that should be considered when looking at ways to conduct a worship service in a new way. The medium that we use to convey God’s Word does leave an impression.

It does not need to be the job of a church even a virtual one, to reinvent the way that worship is done from the ground up.¹⁸ The church has a rich history of worship practices, and these practices are important. The Lutheran church has for centuries retained liturgical forms of

16. Wilson, Jared C. *The Gospel-Driven Church: Uniting Church Growth Dreams with the Metrics of Grace*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019. 214

17. Bock, Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*, 180.

18. Smith, James K. A. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Illustrated edition. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2016. 181

worship that builds off ways that the church has worshipped God for 2000 years. The Lutheran Church's worship practices have always been rooted in emphasizing the means of grace. There is a reason that Churches do what they do when it comes to their worship[practices. One shortcoming of virtual worship could be that it would be easy to justify getting rid of all liturgical traditions for the sake of accommodating virtual worship.

Edifying Virtual Worship

Scripture does not prescribe one way for everyone to worship. The Lutheran confessions show that a variety of rites, ceremonies, and traditions can be used in worship. The purpose of these practices is always done with the goal of building up the body of believers. There is no denying that virtual worship is very different from how public worship in the past, but that does not mean that I cannot be done well. Knowing some of the possible shortcomings of online worship can help the pastor and congregation work to create a worship space that is edifying even if it is online.

In his book "You Are What You Love" James Smith talks about how the idea that we are surrounded by "liturgies of daily life" he says that worship is something that humans naturally do. However, worship that is intentional is the kind that is the most edifying. He talks about one the most important aspect of creating intentional worship in our lives when he says: "If the kind of worshipers the Father seeks are those who worship in spirit and in truth, there is only one thing for us to do—preach the Gospel. It is only through the means of grace that the Holy Spirit will touch the spirit and heart and soul of people to create, nourish, and strengthen faith in Jesus the Savior. Then worship can happen. Then worship will happen. And it will be in awe and

reverence.”¹⁹ This line of thought can be directly applied to virtual worship. The driving force behind any meaningful worship is the gospel. It is the gospel, the truth of sins forgiven, that creates meaningful worship. If virtual church is to be edifying it must be centered around the gospel.

Smith also covers in his book that worship is not just something material. It is a natural part of human life, but it is not only natural. The human creature is made of body and soul. There is a spiritual element to humans. In worship God touches both elements of the human creature. The Holy Spirit works through the material to create and strengthen faith.²⁰ The worship that we join in needs to have both aspects in mind. While it is true that the place that where we worship is not what makes worship valid, it does have a role to play in how this worship engages us. In the case of virtual worship, the pastor should take into consideration the way that worship affects the worshipper beyond what is being said.

One way to do this is to utilize the traditions that there are in the Lutheran church. Virtual worship does not mean that a pastor needs to reinvent worship from the ground up. He has a rich history of tradition and worship practices to rely on. “When the church’s public worship respects and experiences worship practices from the church’s history, the message is the same. Ancient songs, historic customs, and even the pastor’s throwback vestments imitate the faith of those who have gone before us and remind us that we are a part of the church that spans back to centuries before our time.”²¹ Using some of these things will require creativity to bring use them

19. Stellick, John E. *Reverence in Worship* Chicago Pastoral Conference, New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lake Zurich, IL, January 8-9, 2001. 5

20. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, 70.

21. Strey, *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*, 52.

effectively in virtual worship. However, with work and maybe some good old-fashioned trial and error, virtual congregation can have edifying worship that does not forsake all tradition and sense of what it means to be Lutheran.

While it is true that virtual worship may run the risk of losing the element of worshipping with other believers. There are also unique opportunities that it provides. There is a place for heads of households to step up and lead their family in worship and devotional study. There can be a consumeristic mentality even in physical worship. A physical church can be treated with the same nonchalant attitude that a virtual church can. It is always a pastor's goal to help people see that worship can be so much more than just something we check off a to do list on Sunday mornings once a week. It is an opportunity to gather with other believers and praise our God. It is an opportunity to encourage one another and build each other up. A pastor has the desire to teach that the whole life of a Christian is a life of worship. There is this same opportunity for pastors of virtual congregations to help teach and equip their members to seek out opportunities to be in God's Word with other believers even if that group is just their family, that is a valuable and God pleasing thing. "When we situate our households in the wider household of God and extend the liturgies of worship to shape the ethos of our homes, we resituate even the mundane."²² One of the unique things about virtual worship is it brings worship, the liturgy, and God's Word into the home. Recognizing this opportunity and teaching people to seize it is just one way that a pastor can make virtual worship more edifying for those participating in their homes.

The most essential part of Lutheran worship is the means of grace. It is through the gospel in Word and sacrament that God offers us daily the forgiveness of sins and the assurance

22. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*, 133.

of life eternal with him. There can be a fear that if people stop worshipping in a church together with others, we are losing something that cannot be replaced virtually. It is a valid fear. Before a pastor can commit to leading a congregation in worshipping virtually, he must be convinced that he can do so in such away that people are edified. This cannot be something that he is just convinced of in theory. A pastor must know for a fact that his people are being edified by the worship practices he chooses to use. The priority of a pastor has to be that the people of God receive the means of grace because “God comes through Word and sacraments whether we sense his presence or not. He who is the Word made flesh now comes to us through the proclamation of the Word made flesh.”²³ Even if worship looks different than we are used to seeing, or it is done through a computer screen rather than in a chapel, as long as the Word of God is there, God is there also. It is God who edifies us through worship. He promises that wherever people gather in his name he is there also (Matt 18:20).

23. Otto, Joel. *“The Augustana and Lutheran Worship”* 2005. 6

PART III: COMMUNITY

The second issue that a virtual congregation faces is creating a community of believers. Going to church is about so much more than just an individual's personal experience. Congregations are a community. The issue boils down to the question of whether a virtual community can be a community like God intends for his church to be. Can virtual relationships be as fulfilling or as meaningful as face-to-face ones?

Scriptural Principles

Scripture is very clear that God blesses his people with fellowship and encouragement from other believers. The writer to the Hebrews encourages Christians to encourage one another when he says: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb 10:19-25). The question that needs to be answered is can this concept of meeting together truly be fulfilled in virtually? It is God's desire that his people spend time together. In a world that grows more and more hostile to God and his Word every day, relationships among believers become more and more important.

God wants his church to grow. He wants Christians to build one another up. "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole

measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13). God calls us all to build one another up. God uses other people to bless us. The Lord of the Church desires that his people be a communion of saints. He does not leave us alone in this world to fend for ourselves. He surrounds us with fellow believers that we might be united in our mutual faith. It is why we are encouraged to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:3-6).

Confessions on Community

The confessions recognize identify what it is that makes up a house of worship. “the house would not be called a church if it were not for the single reason that the group of people come together in it. For we who come together choose a special place and give the house its name because of this group.”²⁴ It is the fact that people come together to worship that makes it a congregation. It is not the building that they inhabit. A common faith and a desire to worship are what makes up the community of saints that gather to worship every Sunday.

In his Large Catechism, Luther identifies this as the one of the things that the holy Spirit does for his church. Luther says: “For creation is now behind us, and redemption has also taken place, but the Holy Spirit continues his work without ceasing until the Last Day, and for that purpose he has appointed a community on earth, through which he speaks and does all his

24. LC. II. 48 (the creed)

work.”²⁵ Luther identifies that it is the community of believers that carries out the Lord’s work of spreading his Word to all the world.

It is important that Christian congregations recognize this is the purpose of their community. In a virtual setting it is important to understand that this is the goal. Luther points out another purpose for this community when he says:

In all families and communities harmony needs to be nurtured by mutual responsibilities, and it is not possible to preserve tranquility unless people overlook and forgive certain mistakes among themselves. In the same way, Paul urges that there be love in the church to preserve harmony, to bear with (if need be) the crude behavior of the brothers, and to overlook certain minor offenses, lest the church disintegrate into various schisms and lest enmities, factions, and heresies arise from such schisms.²⁶

It is the unity of the Spirit that allows Christians to work together. It is the love of Christ that holds them together so that they might carry out the work of the church. It is important that these relationships be rooted in Christian love so that small things do not tear apart the body of believers.

Possible Shortcomings of a Virtual Community

Opponents of virtual congregations are quick to point out that in person relationships are much more meaningful and fulfilling than virtual ones. Even though technology is bringing us closer together the relationships formed online are different. Bock and Armstrong in their book “*Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*” look at the feasibility of having a virtual reality church. One of the biggest drawbacks that they see with a VR church is the relationships formed in a virtual space. they write: “it is not possible to replace in VR the trust that can be established

25. LC. II. 61

26. Ap. IV. 232

through building relationships in person. This does not mean that every member of the congregation needs to meet with every other member of the congregation every week in order to have a healthy church, but it does mean that in person communication will continue to play a unique role in establishing trust between members of Christian churches and ministry partners.”²⁷

In order for a virtual congregation to succeed at develop these kinds of meaningful relationships. Bock and Armstrong propose that some aspect of in person interaction is necessary. They go on to explain:

Going to church or being part of a congregation is about hearing the Word of God and participating in worship. However, there is more to it than that. It is also about being part of a community of believers. Hearing God’s Word preached and participating in worship are aspects of being a congregation that can be done virtually. The aspect that is much more difficult to achieve virtually is a sense of community. It is the encouragement that the body of believers gives to one another. These personal relationships that God desires for his Church to have, are difficult to have to their full extent without personal interaction. A community whose only interaction is completely virtual, has the feeling of a virtual community. Human relationships revolve around interaction. ²⁸

It is a challenge to that pastors must be aware of anytime that they have groups who meet virtually. It is a very different feeling to participate in an event virtually, rather than in person because “although virtual church has a sense of community, it does not necessarily develop for its members into a sense of belonging, with feeling connected or investing themselves with the same intensity as they would have done in traditional Christian fellowship.”²⁹

A community that gathers virtually must face the challenge of how to develop these meaningful relationships through a medium, rather than just by being together. This has to be

27. Bock, Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*, 134.

28. Bock, Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*, 155.

29. Wong, Kam Ming. 2008. “Christians Outside the Church: An Ecclesiological Critique of Virtual Church.” *Heythrop Journal* 49 (5): 838.

intentional. “If we want to make sense of online community, we need to be very clear about what we want “community” to be, what we are using as our standard of comparison, and how we are going to look for our evidence.”³⁰

Creating a Meaningful Virtual Community

It is important to remember that in the church, it is not simply the medium through which we communicate that brings us together. “Regardless of the medium of our communication with one another, it is the holy Spirit who ushers us as a community into the presence of God. It is the holy Spirit who gives unity to the body of believers (Eph 4:3), not a technological apparatus or a particular mode of assembling.”³¹ It is God that unites us. As technology continues to advance it provides newer and more seamless ways for virtual relationships to exist. Once again, this is an area where a virtual congregation would have to make a concerted effort to create meaningful relationships among church members.

The goal of these relationships even if they are virtual must remain the same. “The believer indeed is free of stated forms of worship. He worships in spirit and truth. Yet he submits to them, first because he himself is not a perfect Christian and needs to be trained in the faith, and second, in order to help his neighbor, become a Christian and grow in faith.”³² The community that congregations serve more than just a person’s physical needs. A Christian community should also care for one another’s spiritual needs.

“I would add that the church is more than just a place or a sign commemorating the past event of Christ, insofar as it is a promise, not just made once in the distant past, but

30. Hutchings, Tim. 2015. “Real Virtual Community.” *Word & World* 35 (2): 161.

31. Bock, Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*, 195.

32. Vajta, Vilmos. *Luther on Worship*. Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenburg Press, 1958. 175

eternally guaranteed and renewed by Christ's very presence within the church. Viewing it this way provokes in us a universal sense of place that transcends time and space. The church, therefore, does not exist merely to signify; but rather it effects what it signifies. In other words, the church as a concrete assembling of the people of God is to effect fellowship among Christians and with God. Any community that claims to be church ought to be judged with reference to this principle."³³

33. Wong, "Christians Outside the Church: An Ecclesiological Critique of Virtual Church." 824.

PART IV: THE LORD'S SUPPER

For confessional Lutherans, it seems impossible for the Lord's Supper to be celebrated virtually. The Lutheran confessions highlight the importance of the sacrament in the church's ministry. They also highlight the very physical and tangible ways that God effects faith and forgives sins in the Lord's Supper. This section of the paper will explore the ways that virtual churches incorporate the sacraments into their worship. Then, it will explore the main issues that must be addressed when carrying out Christ's command to celebrate the Lord supper in a virtual setting, and whether it's possible for a virtual Lutheran congregation to still have the sacraments be a part of their life of worship.

Virtual Communion in Practice

In his book "*Simchurch*," Douglas Estes describes the ways the various virtual churches observe the sacraments. He explains that there are four main methods that virtual churches use to celebrate the sacrament. The first approach that he talks about is "symbolic virtual communion." This is where participants of the worship service are asked to meditate on the sacrament as the words of institution are read. This method is not anything like the Scriptural practice of Holy Communion, or like a practice in any physical church body. People may choose to administer

elements to themselves, but there is no minister overseeing the sacrament. The bread and the wine are made to be optional parts of the sacrament.³⁴

The second approach that Estes covers in his book is “avatar-mediated virtual communion. This is the practice of administering the sacrament using avatars. An avatar is an icon or figure representing a particular person in a virtual setting. This would be most common with churches that are experimenting with virtual reality worship. The worshiper’s avatar receives virtual elements that their avatar consumes. Estes admits that this approach is too dissimilar to regular communion practices to be widely used. There are once again no actual elements. It ignores the physical part of the Lord’s Supper.³⁵

These first two examples that Estes talks about in his book are far-fetched and clearly not actually the Lord’s Supper. This is an example of the slippery road that people can go down when they try to make something that is always done physically in person virtual. Lutherans have a high regard for the Lord’s Supper. It is in a real and physical way that Jesus is present in the Supper. The earthly elements are necessary for the sacrament. Without them there is no sacrament. These two methods would never work for a confessional Lutheran church. However, not all Holy Communion practices that are done in virtual churches are this extreme.

The third example that Estes talks about in his book is “extensional virtual communion.” This practice involves the pastor sending the elements that are to be used to the individual members. This practice keeps some sense of unity in the distribution of the elements. During the service, the worshipers are directed after the words of institution to take the elements that were

34. Estes, Douglas. *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009. 118-119

35. Estes, Douglas. *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, 119-120.

given to them ahead of time. Estes admits that one downside remains in this method: this practice could still lead to the trivialization of the sacrament. There is a little more order in this method since the pastor controls who is sent the bread and the wine. However, there is nothing to stop someone who has not been sent the elements to substitute their own.³⁶

The fourth and final method that Estes discusses in his book is “outsourced virtual communion.” This method uses an established physical church to administer the Lord’s Supper to its members who are virtual members. This hybrid form can be accomplished with or without a church building. Sometimes this is done when an established physical church has a virtual campus or virtual group that worships regularly online. The members in that instance will come occasionally to a worship service in person to receive the Lord’s Supper. The other way that “outsourced virtual communion is carried out is with the use of small groups. Many virtual congregations are centered around a local area or city. The small groups are established in order to foster fellowship and biblical study with other members of the virtual congregation. In this case, the pastor would make his rounds to these in person meeting’s and give the sacrament to the small group.³⁷

This method would possibly be a solution for a confessional Lutheran congregation that wants to exist virtually. This hybrid format is quite common among virtual churches. Whether it is small groups or occasional organized gatherings virtual churches will often have opportunities for people to gather in person. There are two main downsides that could come from using this method. One would be that in the case of small groups, there is never a time when the entire congregation is receiving the Lord’s Supper together. The downside for a congregation that uses

36. Estes, Douglas. *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, 120-122

37. Estes, Douglas. *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*, 122-123

occasional in person services is that the Lord's Supper is not offered as frequently. If there are members that are part of a virtual congregation because their schedule or location makes it hard for them to gather in person, then those members could have a difficult time receiving the sacrament frequently. The other issue that needs to be addressed with this method is the fact that having a separate occasion to celebrate the Lord's Supper disconnects the sacrament from preaching. In Christian worship the Word and sacrament go hand in hand.

The Confessions on Virtual Communion

The Lutheran confessions do not cover the topic or issue of virtual communion specifically. At the time that the confessions were written, that would not even be something that they could have imagined. However, there is still value in looking at what the confessions say about the Lord's Supper. There were plenty of unscriptural ideas that were flying around at the time that the confessions were written. This portion of the paper will highlight portions of the confessions that might be useful for a pastor or a congregation that is thinking about trying to celebrate the Lord's Supper virtually.

The first and most important thing to keep in mind when talking about the Lord's Supper is the teaching of the real presence of Christ's body and blood. The confessions clearly state: "The other kind of eating of Christ's body is oral or sacramental, when all who eat the consecrated bread and wine in the supper receive and partake of the true, essential body and blood of Christ orally. Believers receive it as a certain pledge and assurance that their sins are truly forgiven and that Christ dwells in them with his power.³⁸ The Lord's Supper is not merely a

38. FC. SD. VII 63

reminder of Christ's sacrifice. It is truly his body and blood. This means that we approach the Lord's Supper with reverence, recognizing what it is that we receive in this sacrament.

It is because of this reverence that the confessors put an emphasis on the importance of the words of institution when they said: "For wherever what Christ instituted is observed and his words are spoken over the bread and the cup and wherever the consecrated bread and cup are distributed, Christ himself exercises his power through the spoken words, which are still his Word, by virtue of the power of the first institution."³⁹ It is by the power of the Word of Christ that the body and blood of Christ are present in the sacrament. It is not merely the eating and drinking of wine that makes Christ present. This is important to note when considering the implications of celebrating the Lord's Supper virtually. The Word must always be present.

That does not mean that the distribution of the Lord's Supper is unimportant. The way that we celebrate this sacrament does matter. The formula of Concord states: "The *usus* or action (that is, the practice or administration) does not refer primarily to faith or to the oral partaking, but to the entire external, visible administration of the Supper, as Christ established the administration of the Supper: the consecration, or the consecrated bread and wine, Christ's body and blood. Apart from this practice it is not to be regarded as a sacrament."⁴⁰ The administration of the sacrament must be taken into consideration when talking about offering the Lord's Supper virtually. In this sacrament there is clearly a physical and visible element that is involved in the distribution. The question that must be asked about celebrating the Lord's supper virtually is if this practice is in line with the example of the Lord's Supper that we have in Scripture. When Christ first instituted the Lord's Supper it was not through a computer screen.

39. FC. SD. VII 75

40. FC. SD. VII. 86

The confessions do recognize that we do have Christian freedom even when it comes to matters of adiaphora. However, the confessors make a point of saying that it has to be done in a way without burdening consciences when they say: “In this assembly we have sufficiently shown that, for the sake of love, we are not reluctant to observe adiaphora with others, even if such things may prove to be somewhat burdensome. We judge that the greatest possible public concord which can be maintained without offending consciences ought to be preferred to all other interests.”⁴¹ While it may be possible for someone to come to the conclusion that celebrating the Lord’s Supper virtually is still a valid sacrament, there is still the question of whether this can be done without offending consciences and casting doubt on the sacrament.

The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is a blessing that offers us the forgiveness of sins. It offers it in a tangible and physical way. The Confessors understood this and understood the importance of receiving this sacrament frequently. In the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, they state: “There is also a great need to admonish and encourage us so that we do not let this great a treasure, which is daily administered and distributed among Christians, pass by to no purpose. What I mean is that those who want to be Christians should prepare themselves to receive this blessed sacrament frequently.”⁴² The sacrament is not something that should be cast aside in order to accommodate an alternate form of worship.

Issues Related to Celebrating the Lord’s Supper Virtually

The case can be made that in virtual communion there are all three essential parts to celebrating the Lord’s Supper. There is the consecration of the elements when the words of institution are

41. AP. XV. 52

42. LC (Sacrament of the Altar) 39

spoken. A pastor could say that giving bread and wine to the members of the church for them to use during the service. There is the reception of the elements when the members of the church eat the bread and drink the wine. However, it is impossible to say for certain whether this is truly the sacrament or not. It leads to the question: “Is a single consecration at a distance over multiple tables of bread and wine doing the same thing as that which happened ‘when Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread etc.?’ We don't know. But we do know this: it is uncertain.”⁴³ It is this uncertainty that is the main issue with celebrating the Lord’s Supper virtually. It is vital that we turn to Scripture to address this issue, but the truth is that Scripture does not answer definitively whether it can be done virtually. The example that we have from scripture is an in-person celebration of the sacrament. That is what we know for certain.

Luther in a letter that he wrote addresses an issue of adiaphora about the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

Therefore, we will admit no example, not even from Christ himself, much less from other saints, for it must also be accompanied by God’s Word, which explains to us in what sense we are to follow or not to follow it. We do not consider works and examples adequate, indeed we do not want to follow an example: we want the Word, for the sake of which all works, examples and miracles occur. For certainly he is sufficiently wise and articulate, and able to anticipate the future so as to indicate in words everything which is commanded or forbidden.⁴⁴

Luther is writing against Karlstadt in this letter. The issue at hand is whether it is right to elevate the sacrament before distributing the Lord’s Supper. Karlstadt is using the argument that Christ did not do it when he instituted the sacrament to say that Christ has not commanded the elevation

43. WELS Conference of Presidents, *A Pastoral Brief on the Issue of “Virtual Communion,”* 4

44. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009). Hereafter AE. Vol. 40, 132

of the sacrament, therefore, it should not be done. Luther in response, talks about the freedom that Christians have when they celebrate the Lord's supper. He says that on the one side the Roman Catholic church says that it must be done, and on the other side Karlstadt is saying that it should not be done. So, Luther takes the middle road. He says that the elevation of the host is something that is neither forbidden nor commanded. He says that the only source for practice of the Lord's Supper is what the God's Word says. If this line of thought is applied to a virtual celebration of the sacrament it could be argued that a virtual celebration of the sacrament is not forbidden in God's word. While this is true, it does not get around the fact that this practice would inevitably lead to uncertainty in the sacrament. It creates doubt in a blessing that God has given us to bring assurance. Jesus says clearly: "This is my body... this is my blood" (Matt 26:26-28). These words are meant to bring comfort and confidence in the sacrament. It would be an unwise practice to celebrate the Lord's Supper in such a way that we create doubt.

Another issue that could arise when the Lord's Supper is celebrated virtually is the loss of the communion that Christians enjoy with one another in the sacrament. If a virtual church would celebrate the Lord's Supper online, or if the pastor would visit each member individually to give them the Lord's Supper, the members would be missing out on one of the blessings that we receive in the Lord's Supper, because "The fellowship of the Supper is a vertical fellowship between the participant and his Lord. The fellowship of the Supper also requires a horizontal fellowship – a unity of faith, baptism, and Lord – which is witnessed through public confession."⁴⁵ Celebrating the sacrament is a public confession of faith. It shows the unity that we have with those who we are sharing the meal with. This sacrament unites us with God, but it

45. Christie, Aaron L. "*Lutheran Liturgy and Evangelism*" Written for Prof. David Valleskey's Senior Pastoral Theology on February 9, 1997,

also unites us with fellow believers. Adding a virtual element to the Lord's Supper runs the risk of losing this communal aspect of the Lord's Supper all together.

Is Virtual Communion Possible?

After looking at some of the problems that arise when trying to celebrate the Lord's Supper, it leads to the question of whether celebrating the sacrament virtually is even possible. In Christian freedom it may be possible to do it, but it does not mean that is good practice to do so. The apostle Paul's words about Christian freedom come to mind in this discussion. "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive" (1 Cor 10:23). A virtual congregation that is thinking about celebrating the Lord's Supper virtually must take into the consideration the effect that celebrating the sacrament in this way will have on other people.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WELS conference of presidents (COP) released a statement about the issue of virtual communion. They pointed out that it was impossible to say for with absolute certainty that virtual communion is a valid sacrament. The COP describes how this uncertainty affects the Lord's Supper. They say:

This uncertainty creates an even more fundamentally insurmountable problem for anyone wishing to consider it a wise practice. The entire purpose of the Sacrament is, as the Lord's Last Will and Testament, to make certainty doubly sure. It was intended to breathe confidence into despairing hearts, to give strength to anxious and wavering spirits. But how can something uncertain make someone certain? It simply cannot!⁴⁶

This statement gets to the main issue with the virtual celebration of the Lord's Supper. It is taking something that God has given us as an assurance of forgiveness and casting doubt on it.

46. WELS Conference of Presidents, *A Pastoral Brief on the Issue of "Virtual Communion."* 5

The question of whether this is truly the sacrament will always remain in at least some people's minds.⁴⁷

In the light of the possible uncertainty that a virtual celebration of the Lord's Supper could cause it would be wise for a pastor to find another way to administer the sacrament. These options are only available if the virtual congregation is based around a central location. If the church was based in a specific city, it would be possible for the pastor to meet people in person to administer the Lord's Supper. He could do this either individually or meet with small groups.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is a sign of unity. It is meant to be shared amongst a group of believers. Paul talks about this when he describes the sacrament in this way: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf" (1 Cor 10:16-17). It would be hard to justify a communion practice that did not reflect this aspect of the Lord's Supper.

When it comes to a communion practice for a confessional Lutheran church "What matters most is that we place a high value on the Lord's Supper and adopt a practice that reflects our understanding of the sacrament."⁴⁸ This is no different for a virtual congregation. The practice of a church demonstrates what they believe takes place in the Lord's Supper. Virtual communion is not the wisest practice because of the doubt that it causes. However, that does not automatically mean that a virtual Lutheran congregation cannot exist. There are ways that the

⁴⁷ The question of whether or not a virtual celebration of the Lord's Supper is truly the sacrament is a question that deserves its own in-depth study. For this paper, I will not be giving a definitive answer of whether it is or is not a valid sacrament. It is hard to give a definitive answer. I simply wanted to raise some of the issues that come up when attempting to celebrate the sacrament virtually namely, the uncertainty that it raises in the validity of the sacrament.

48. Strey, *Christian Worship: God Gives His Gospel Gifts*, 245.

Lord's Supper could be celebrated wisely. This is especially true if the congregation is based in a local area. A pastor could choose to occasionally have an in-person worship service where the sacrament is offered.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper is the most controversial issue when it comes to a Lutheran congregation existing virtually. As with any of the issues that this paper has looked at, a pastor of a virtual church must prayerfully consider whether it is possible for the Lord's Supper can be celebrated in a way that follows God's Word. The Lord's Supper is a special gift that deserves to be celebrated in reverence with a practice that reflects the importance of what is happening in the sacrament. While it may not be possible, to celebrate the sacrament virtually, a virtual congregation could still celebrate the Lord's Supper by meeting in person.

PART V: CONCLUSION

Before answering the question of whether a confessional Lutheran church can exist virtually it is important to look at the most difficult challenges that face a virtual church. This paper has explored three main issues: worship, community, and celebrating the Lord's Supper. Each of these issues present their own unique challenges when they are done virtually. The congregation that wants to exist virtually, and the pastor that is going to lead them, need to prayerfully consider how they are going to carry each one out virtually. There needs to be worship that prioritizes the means of grace. There needs to be a meaningful and genuine Christian community that builds each other up. The Lord's Supper needs to be done in a way that does not cause doubt.

These three main issues are by no means an exhaustive list of all the things that need to be taken into consideration for a pastor who wants to shepherd a virtual congregation. A pastor must look at whether the benefits of a virtual congregation outweigh the blessings of gathering in person. This choice cannot be made simply for the sake of convenience. A pastor must be thoroughly convinced that the souls under his care are having their spiritual needs met. He must also be intentional in the way that the congregation addresses the issues that existing virtually presents.

I believe that all three of these criteria can be met. It is possible for a confessional Lutheran church to exist virtually. I believe that with creativity, and proper respect for liturgical tradition, worship can be done in an edifying way. It is possible for members to develop

meaningful and encouraging Christian relationships virtually and form a community of believers. The area that causes the most problems is how to carry out the Lord's Supper. The practice of celebrating the Lord's Supper virtually casts doubt. That is why I believe that it is necessary for the pastor to be able to distribute the elements in person. The best way for this to happen is for this virtual congregation to have a localized congregation even if they do not have a physical church building.

The Bible speaks about the freedom that Christians have through Christ. This includes the freedom to worship in a variety of ways. The Confessions show that this freedom has always been prized by the Lutheran church. It must be done out of love and with respect to other's consciences. "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col 3:17)

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