



**SALEM UNITED CHURCH**  
OF CHRIST

## **THE QUESTION OF ONLINE HOLY COMMUNION** *A POSITION PAPER*

**Rev. Dr. Mark E. Yurs**  
*May 12, 2020*

### *Introduction*

The Sacrament of Holy Communion, older than the New Testament, is a means by which the Living Lord chooses to make himself known, offer himself to his people, convey his blessing, strengthen the faith of participants, and receive their gratitude. The Bylaws of our church, in Articles IV(8)(iv) and VI(1)(b) assign oversight of this Sacrament to the Church Council and the Pastor. The Sacrament's significance demands of us that we give all questions related to it due theological consideration, guarding against, on the one hand, being cavalier with regard to the Sacrament and, on the other, denying our people something God wishes them to have.

### *Question*

The COVID-19 pandemic has put us in quarantine, keeping us from gathering in person for public worship. Technology has made it possible for us to record worship services and upload them to the Internet so our people can worship God from the protective shelter of their homes. A question quite naturally arises concerning the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Is it theologically appropriate to offer Communion by way of an online worship service? Is the meaning of this Sacrament maintained when conducted remotely?

### *Position*

While there are some congregations currently offering Holy Communion remotely via online worship services, I do not believe there is theological warrant for doing so given the method we are using to conduct online worship. The Salem Church Council agreed with this position at its May 12, 2020 meeting, so our church will dispense with celebrations of the Sacrament of Holy Communion until the quarantine passes and we can gather in the sanctuary once again for services of public worship.

### *Biblical Basis*

A key text informing this thinking is 1 Corinthians 11:26, which immediately follows the Words of Institution: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, *you proclaim* the Lord's death until he comes." The italics are mine, highlighting the phrase that is determinative for me.

### *Discussion*

A Sacrament is, by definition, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the outward and visible signs are chiefly, but not exclusively, the elements of Communion: the bread and the wine or grape juice. There is also the outward sign of action which should not be overlooked. The actions that take place during the celebration of Communion also tell of the mystery of God's grace.

Christ is the principle actor in Communion and the people partaking in Communion are the recipients of Christ's actions. This is the passive side of Communion as far as the people are concerned. The spiritual focus is almost always and wholly on this passive side: people are *given* Communion, they *receive* the elements, they take what was broken and poured *for them*, etc. All this is in commemoration of what God has done for us in

Christ. Were this all that Communion entails, it could be handled remotely, with the people using elements from their households.

But there is an active side to Communion that should not be neglected. The active side appears in scripture at 1 Corinthians 11:26: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

*You proclaim . . . .* Those who receive Holy Communion are not simply passive recipients of something done for their benefit. They are also proclaimers of something for the benefit of others. The proclamation happens in our eating and drinking for all to see.

Altar Communion adds the proclamation of movement whereby communicants come forward to receive the elements. Pew Communion entails movement as well, for the people accept the plates as they come to them, pass the plates to their neighbor so that the neighbor also may receive, and all wait to partake until all are served. Each movement is symbolic and rich with theological import.

Thus the meaning of Communion is not in bread and cup alone but also in the proclamation that happens through the communicants at the time the Sacrament is celebrated.

A pre-recorded service or a live-streamed service *where the worshipers cannot see one another* precludes this element of proclamation, leaving Holy Communion truncated as merely something passively received. I suspect a service, such as over Zoom, where worshipers *could see one another* partaking of Communion, may be theologically legitimate. But this is not the worship life Salem has online.

Someone may ask, What about Private Communion for the homebound? Is that, too, then illegitimate? No, Private Communion with the homebound remains legitimate, for there is always another, if only the minister acting as presider, who is present as a witness to what the partaker is proclaiming by partaking.

The absence of Holy Communion during and throughout the quarantine is to be much lamented, for the celebration of the Sacrament holds much meaning. Even so, the possibility of deep spiritual communion with God remains through the resources of prayer, Bible reading, hymn-singing, meditation, hearing the Assurance of Pardon, receiving the Benediction, and so forth. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not necessary for salvation or for worship to be considered complete.