

Pandemic: A Time for Eucharistic Feast

In this time of social uncertainty, questions have arisen about how best to care for the beloved of God; understandably, Lutherans concerned about the Sacrament have turned to reputable names within the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and heard of claims of a divinely-imposed “Eucharistic Fast.”

Two circulating resources have caught the attention of pastors and laity in the LCMS. Bryan Wolfmueller’s YouTube video, while providing a very good argument over against “virtual communion,” also claims that three characteristics of the Supper cannot be met under our current circumstance, with the result that we must understand God to be declaring/allowing a “Eucharistic fast.” Rev. William Cwirla’s appeal to his congregation, posted for public consumption on the congregation’s website and now widely dispersed within the synod, appeals to Luther, Isaiah, and governing authorities to support his contention that God desires His pastors to declare and explain a “Eucharistic fast.” Both pastors are to be credited for seeking justification for mandatory abstinence from the Eucharist, but because their conclusions are meant for public consumption, they need public response.

In Cwirla’s letter, he states, “Many bad ideas and practices have entered the church through emergency situations and extraordinary measures. The extraordinary tends to become the ordinary.” He’s exactly right, which is exactly why the notion of a “Eucharistic fast” begs cautious analysis before it is believed and taught.

The underlying error of the “Eucharistic fast” notion is not that individual Christians may – for various reasons – choose to refrain from the Sacrament (or, on account of impenitence, may need to be pastorally suspended from it). Rather, the error is that *pastors* impose by proclamation a “Eucharistic fast” upon the people because the God-ordained governing authorities have done so. Cwirla: “God has spoken through His left-hand minister of the sword; we would do well to heed him.” By such reasoning, the early Christians were sinning as they met in catacombs to celebrate the Eucharist.

Appeals to the Fourth Commandment are also offered as rationale for locking the church doors. But, further reflection may find this rationale to be a misapplication of the Fourth Commandment in two ways:

(1) The Fourth Commandment does not give the kingdom of the left hand plenary power over the kingdom of the right hand. Just as the clergy have no authority over secular matters, so also no officer of any civil government has God-ordained authority over divine matters, even if those divine matters are thought by the left hand kingdom to have an adverse impact upon society. In fact, the Large Catechism’s explanation of the Ten Commandments gives primary authority to the head of household, because marriage, the family, and the Church is the original estate of Creation which the civil estate was established to protect and defend. Thus, Romans 13 cannot rightly be applied to those situations in which the actions of the governing authorities prohibit the distribution of the Sacraments and any other God-ordained activity of the family and the Church.

(2) The Fourth Commandment does not call the Christian to honor a lower authority when that lower authority undercuts the higher authority to which it is subject. The highest authority in our nation’s governance is the Constitution, the First Amendment of which requires ‘the free exercise of religion’ and the right of public assembly. Christians, then, should not use appeals to the Fourth Commandment to justify or turn a blind eye to the oppression of the Church’s right to gather to call

upon the name of the Lord, responsibly administering and receiving the Supper, though it may require smaller units of its members at each abbreviated service.

Cwirla also implies that – for reason of public health – the church can/should be prohibited from gathering to receive the Sacrament: “Christians have no special immunity to viruses.” Cwirla appeals to Luther, who advised fasts for those who were troubled in conscience. But this only proves that Luther spoke to those troubled in conscience; it does not say that Luther withheld the Sacrament from those who desired it. That same Luther, during the Black Plague, exhorted pastors to remain at their posts, faithful to Christ’s flock, comforting, absolving and communing His people. Indeed, Luther himself remained at his post as the plague swept through Wittenberg in 1527. Individual Christians may, for Biblical reason, refrain from receiving the Sacrament for a time; but the pastor may not leave his post. Instead, as the doctors and nurses are expected to face personal pandemic danger to provide medicinal care for the body, pastors must be willing to face personal pandemic danger to provide Ignatius’ “medicine of immortality” for the soul.

Should Christians eagerly support public health efforts to mitigate diseases, especially those which endanger public health? Absolutely. But, Jesus himself was certainly well aware of such hazards, even predicting great pestilence (Luke 21:11). Ye He did not instruct His disciples to refrain from his needed gifts in such an “emergency.” Instead of cowering, He told them to “straighten up and raise your heads” (Luke 21:28) and, a few days later, instituted His Holy Supper and distributed it to His confused and troubled disciples “on the night when He was betrayed.” A pandemic is not reason for the Church to declare a Eucharistic fast and refrain from giving and receiving the faith-strengthening body and blood of Jesus. Indeed, it’s the time during which the *holy* body and blood of the God-man is so needed by Christ’s people, not as a legalistic necessity for salvation, but for the needed strengthening of faith in a time of threatening crisis, a need which cannot be supplied by hand sanitizer, ultraviolet light, or hydroxochloroquine.

The appeal to Isaiah (and Wolfmueller’s appeal to Nebuchadnezzar destroying the temple and causing a cessation to the divinely authorized sacrifices) are unconvincing, since these are examples of the Old Covenant, while we live in the New Covenant, with “an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat” (Hebrews 13:10). By instituting the New Covenant, Jesus makes the old obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), so that the hymn may joyfully confess,

“Gone the bliss of Eden’s garden,
Gone the age of sacrifice,
Ours the time of grace and favor,
Ours the call to paradise!” (LSB, 572)

The appeal to Pieper is also unconvincing. Pieper does, indeed, say that “all means of grace have the same purpose and the same effect.” This is true as it refers to the “end effect,” namely, salvation. But Dr. Pieper would surely *not* say that one is adopted into the family of God by the Supper. Nor would he say that a “Baptismal Fast” might be declared during a pandemic. Indeed, the very fact that there is “emergency Baptism” but not “emergency Supper” proves that the sacraments do not have the same purpose. The Supper *is most certainly and efficaciously* for the strengthening of faith... and, precisely when the sheep of Christ so need to be fed the strengthening Body and Blood of Christ is not the time for the novelty of declaring some hidden will of God concerning a “Eucharistic fast”, a supposed “hidden

will” which has superseded the revealed will of “My body... my blood... for you” and “you proclaim the Lord’s death *until He comes.*”

In short, it would seem we are really not in any “emergency circumstance” the Church has never known before and the Lord had not foreknown! And yet, nowhere before have we heard “Thus saith the Lord, it is a Eucharistic fast!”

Finally, there is the argument that the church gathered is necessary for the Sacrament to be offered. Wolfmueller’s YouTube video claims that the Supper is to be a public confession and fellowship, and that there is no “emergency Supper.” True, but what number is required to make that public confession and fellowship? Is it not “two or three witnesses”? Were there not a mere eleven or twelve with the Lord at the Institution of the Supper? Are there not three witnesses who testify on the earth: the water, the Spirit, the blood? Cwirla does not get into numbers, but claims that “without the gathered congregation ... there is no Body of Christ to receive the Body of Christ.” But, does not Jesus say, “Where two or three are gathered in my Name, *there I am in the midst of them.*” Indeed there’s reason to believe that the sacramental mystery of the “breaking of the bread” which occurred “on the night He was betrayed” occurred again on that first Easter night as Jesus officiated at Emmaus with but two disciples at table with Him.

So, when the Church—during times of governmentally imposed emergency measures—limits the number of members who can attend the Divine Service, does that mean that the congregation no longer exists and the Body of Christ is not there where fewer numbers have gathered to receive His Body and Blood? May the Supper only be celebrated when the congregation has reached a “quorum”? Rather, might it not be better argued that, in “extreme circumstances,” the gathering of the congregation may be as small as “two or three,” in addition to the “steward of the mysteries” who has been called by God and the congregation to administer the sacraments in ordinary and extraordinary times. So also with this two or three, or five or ten, are “the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven,” so that this is actually a larger gathering of God’s saints than any earthly assembly could ever be.

Cwirla says, “The Lord’s Supper is a feast of victory, not an act of despair, panic, and emergency.” But, what makes the Supper a feast of victory is not the emotions or context of those who partake. When was it that the Supper was instituted if not “on the night when He was betrayed,” the night when the disciples panicked and despaired because of the ‘emergency situation’ in which they found themselves sheltered in the Upper Room out of fear. And on those Lord’s Days subsequent to our Lord’s victorious death and resurrection, when the persecuted gathered in ‘sheltered-in places’ (such as catacombs), wasn’t it to celebrate the feast of the victory of our Lord? The Supper is *always* the feast of victory, even in tiny, humble settings, even for those who are despairing, panicked, and feel their lives are turned upside down by an extreme ‘emergency’ situation.

Cwirla also argues, “If it doesn’t look, sound, and feel like the Lord’s Supper we know, perhaps it would be best to forego it for a while until we are able to receive it in the ordinary way once again.” Really? Tell that to the shut-in and the Christian near death. What makes the Supper the Supper? Not what it looks, sounds and feels like in celebration, but the very Word of Christ that causes His real presence to be there for them in those extraordinary emergency situations when they so need it.

Our own Augsburg Confession cites Ambrose, "Because I always sin, I always need the Sacrament" (AC XXIV, 30); and Luther says in the Large Catechism, "We must never regard the Sacrament as something injurious from which we had better flee, but as a pure, wholesome, comforting remedy imparting salvation and comfort" (LC V, 66). The circumstances of our need are not determined by public or bodily health and safety. The circumstances are determined by our uninterrupted need for the *holy body and holy blood* of our Lord Jesus Christ. "I always need the Sacrament."

In that spirit, the Formula of Concord confesses, "He has not only promised this gracious election with mere words, but has also certified it with an oath and sealed it with the holy Sacraments. We can <ought to> call these to mind in our most severe temptations and take comfort in them, and with them we can quench the fiery darts of the devil" (FC XI, Epitome, 13).

Therefore, the Christian should be afforded the opportunity to gather with two or three and, in the public confession of the Church, be strengthened by the body and blood of Christ... in every circumstance of life. And if the government forbids the Church to gather to receive the Sacrament for more than a brief period of time, the Church must not claim Romans 13, but Acts 5 as its directive.

Therefore, pastors, though our congregants may choose to refrain, we may not give up our duty to offer them the Sacrament of our Lord. And, surely, we must not impose (or proclaim as coming from God's hidden will) an unfounded 'Eucharistic fast' upon His people. Pastors are not only "stewards of the mysteries," but also "bondservants of Christ" (1 Corinthians 4). They may not, then, declare a *fast* where Christ has only and always promised His *feast*. So, stay at your post; stand your ground; gather at the altar of God with only two or three, if necessary; and heed His call: "Feed My Sheep."

A bondservant of Christ,
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