



A CRITIQUE OF THE VIRTUAL CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

Abiodun Oluwasogo Adegoke, PhD*

Department of Practical Theology, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho

Corresponding Author: Abiodun Oluwasogo Adegoke (Department of Practical Theology, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho)

Article History: Received: 29/08/2025; Accepted: 19/09/2025; Published: 21/09/2025

Abstract: Background: With the increase in technological advancement, concepts such as online church, live streaming, and online offering to mention a few have become commonplace. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic, four years ago, forced a massive move of churches to the online space. Although the pandemic has become an historical event of the past, church leaders are still dealing with the outcome of the changes this period catalyzed. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are two main ordinances among Protestant churches, and for the first time, some church leaders were forced to consider administering the Lord's Supper online or not observing at all. Since the post-COVID phase, some churches have maintained online Lord's Supper as a norm for non-physical members. The initiation of virtual Lord's Supper celebration demands theological reflection so that the church may not lose the purpose of the meal in a bid to be pragmatic. This article argues that except in extremely extenuating circumstances, online communion defeats the very purpose of the meal. The article will briefly describe the concept of the Lord's Supper, explore the emergence of online worship experiences, underscore the COVID-19 as a catalyst to the acceleration and acceptance of online communion as a common practice and finally critique the practice of administering the Lord's Supper online.

Keywords: Lord's Supper, virtual celebration, communion, online church.

Cite this article: Adegoke, A., O. (2025). A CRITIQUE OF THE VIRTUAL CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER. *MRS Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Studies*, 2(9),34-52.

Introduction

With the digital revolution of the recent past, the church across different places has witnessed changes in its operations and administrations concerning proclamation, liturgy, and its outlook on worship generally. Satellite worship experiences, online offerings, and streaming worship online have become the new order. Of the various digital expressions, this paper is concerned with celebrating the Lord's Supper virtually.

The post-Reformation church has held distinct views on the significance of the Lord's Supper in the church's ministry. However, these distinctions have not veiled the importance of the Lord's Supper in each of these traditions. Whether transubstantiation, consubstantiation, spiritual presence, or memorialist views, each denomination agrees that the Lord's Supper is a vital ordinance/sacrament of the church and has traditionally administered the meal under the supervision of an ordained minister or whoever the church appoints within the context of a gathered local body. However, with the changes in the past few decades, denominational leaders have begun rethinking their theology of the Lord's Supper to ascertain what constitutes proper administration of the Lord's Supper in an online church experience.¹

A Brief History of the Virtual Church

Darrell Bock and Jonathan Armstrong trace the virtual church's beginnings to the chatroom invention of the early 1990s.² Well-meaning Christians engaged the chatrooms to discuss the Christian faith, thus using the chatrooms for communicative purposes.³ Others started using email, "online listmeet" as a forum to meet at specific times and places.⁴

In 1994, retired Reverend Charles Henderson of The Presbyterian Church USA founded "The First Church of Cyberspace." This church was perhaps the first claim to a virtual church. Henderson had experienced that weekly, only one in ten people attended the Sunday worship. So, his virtual church was

and other Virtual Reality (VR) churches that use virtual or augmented reality.

² Bock, and Armstrong, chap. 3, sec. 1, Kindle.

³ Caitlin Dewey, "A Complete History of the Rise and Fall—and Reincarnation!—of the Beloved '90s Chatroom," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/30/a-complete-history-of-the-rise-and-fall-and-reincarnation-of-the-beloved-90s-chatroom/>.

⁴ Bock, and Armstrong, chap. 3, sec. 1, Kindle.

¹ This researcher uses the term "Virtual church" to describe a spectrum of ideas that include but is not limited to church using virtual chatrooms, Youtube and Facebook churches, This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license



missional with the intent to reach the remaining nine.⁵ While Henderson seemed to have been alone in this shift, his attempt became a seed that will find maturation in the coming years. Researchers in the late 1990s began predicting that the church soon would witness a time when doing church online would be the norm, while physically going to church would be outmoded.⁶

With the invention of Facebook in 2004, more people became online converts, and pseudonyms and avatars that characterized the chatroom disappeared before real interactions. In the same year, 2004, the Church of England launched its first official online church called “The I-Church.”⁷ Within the same decade, Douglas Estes popularized the online church experience with his publication *Simchurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World*. Unlike Henderson’s missional intent of reaching the unchurched, Estes argued that the online church is not simply an extension of the church for evangelism; it is an opportunity to experience community and discipleship as Christian churches. He argued that “The best way to reach and disciple people in virtual worlds is with virtual churches.”⁸

Other experimental online churches began emerging, such as the Church of Fools 2004, a conglomerate experiment by the Methodist and Anglican Church of England, Second Life 2003, Robloxian Christian 2011, an online church on the Roblox gaming platform.⁹ Meanwhile, with the introduction of YouTube, more churches started streaming their videos online.¹⁰ Churches with

sophisticated media teams, such as Saddleback Church, started weekly services for the online congregation.¹¹

In the Nigerian landscape, online churches have also emerged. Mega-churches employ the online space to keep their members who have migrated to Western countries. With the continued technological advancement, mega-churches use the online space to stream worship services from the headquarters church to their members both in the country and to different parts of the world where their members have migrated.

With online churches being everywhere, practices like listening to a sermon, praying, giving offerings, and partaking of the Lord’s Supper have all come online. Particularly, virtual communion practices have become so common that practitioners are administering the communion in a variety of ways. John Dyers outlines five ways in which practitioners administer the communion online. These include Self-service, Live within service, Virtual/Avatar Communion, Spiritual communion, and online communion services. Self-service communion is asynchronous. Visitors can watch the video link and partake in the communion they have prepared. Live within service takes the element at the same time. In the virtual/avatar communion, church attendees take no bread or wine. Instead, their avatars consume virtual elements. In the spiritual communion model, the communion involves a shared prayer but not a shared meal. The last model is those who hold services on Facebook or YouTube for the sake of the communion. It is similar to the Live within the service model, but not within the context of a gathered church.¹² Of these models, only the Live within the service comes close to the theological underpinnings that should guard the communion. Yet, it is not without its shortcomings. A later section will address these shortcomings.

Despite this development, traditional churches have considered the virtual church as an add-on to actual physical existing churches. Church practices such as the ordinances have been left predominantly to the physically gathered church. However, the 2020 pandemic accelerated the need to address whether virtual churches should perform the ordinances. This section has considered the advent of the virtual church experience. The following section will assess the viability of observing the Lord’s Supper in the virtual church experience.

Lord’s Supper and the Post-COVID-19 Virtual Church

In 2025, the 2019/2020 COVID pandemic seems like an event of the distant past. Yet, different organizations, including the church, still have to deal with the adjustments of the pandemic. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic forced the church to ponder whether online churches should administer the Lord’s Supper. Regardless of the denominational view, churches were forced to either not observe the meal at all or temporarily observe it online. Virtual church proponents also saw an opportunity to push the virtual agenda to include the virtual Lord’s Supper into mainstream Christianity. Bock and Armstrong note that this discussion is crucial because “in the majority of Christian traditions, the identity of the local congregation as a legitimate expression of the universal

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Patrick Dixon, *Cyberchurch: Christianity and the Internet* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1997), Dixon predicted that churches would in the future stream the services online: “I predict that it will not be long before a number of the larger churches worldwide begin to go live with camera and sound, allowing people to drop in on live services.” (177). George Barna had similar prediction based on research: “The reports projects that within this decade as many as 50 million individuals may rely solely upon the internet to provide all of their faith-based experience.” *Barna Research Group*, “More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences,” May 21, 2001, <https://www.barna.com/research/more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences/>.

⁷ The initial official report described the I-Church as “the vision to use the internet to create a new spiritual community; a network church for people who do not wish, or are not able, to join a local church. It was also hoped that it would be available as ‘added value’ to existing church members who travel or who are otherwise unable to be part of their local church.” See Bock, and Armstrong, (notes, chap. 3, no. 30, Kindle).

⁸ Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 96.

⁹ Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media* (London: Routledge, 2017), 67; “History,” The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, <https://slangcath.wordpress.com/about/history/> accessed March 18, 2021; *The Robloxian Christians Online Church*, “What Is The Robloxian Christians?,” <https://www.therobloxianchristians.org/about> accessed September 9, 2025.

¹⁰ Bock & Armstrong, chap. 3, sec. 2, Kindle.

¹¹ Ibid, 100.

¹² John Dyer, “Digital Communion: History, Theology, and Practices” (March 23, 2020), <https://j.hn/digital-communion-summary-of-theology-practices/>.

¹⁹ “Advisory Opinion - Communion in an Emergency/Pandemic,” PCUSA, edited March 24, 2020, https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communio_n_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf.³⁰ accessed March 18, 2021. Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* about the middle of the second century, contains the earliest reference to the

²⁴ Clint Schnekloth, “A Terribly Geeky Sacramental Theological Case for ‘Virtual’ and De-Clericized Holy Communion” March 20, 2020, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/clintschnekloth/2020/03/a-terribly-geeky-sacramental-theological-case-for-virtual-and-de-clericized-holy-communion/> accessed March 31, 2021.

another in profound, meaningful, and real ways even when we're physically distant.²⁵

Yet others have argued that Christ's presence can be mediated over digital reality. In June 2009, Paul Fiddes, Professor of Theology at the University of Oxford, contributed a paper to a theology symposium titled "Sacraments in a Virtual World?" Fiddes proposed that avatars can participate in sacraments performed within a virtual world. Fiddes writes, "The key theological question is whether the triune God is present and whether Christ is incarnate (in some form, including the church) within the virtual world. If the answer is yes, then one can conceive of the mediation of grace through the materials of that world, i.e., through digital representations."²⁶ European Baptists like Stephen Holmes contend that online communion should be an acceptable possibility, if the need arises, on the basis of Calvin's eucharistic presence and the church's ecclesiology, rather than sacramental theology.²⁷

Summarily, proponents of online communion argue that, based on God's omnipresence, Christ's presence can be virtually mediated even through the avatars, that "presence" as it concerns the church does not have to be embodied physicality, and that since no clergy performs any sacramental rites on the elements, then believers can partake of the communion virtually.

Critique of the Virtual Lord's Supper

Bock and Armstrong's response to Fiddes' position should suffice as a fair critique. They note that "the virtual world in Fiddes' thought (digital representation) is no space at all. God's grace is present in the physical space from which real people access VR worlds, but VR is no more a space that God's grace inhabits than is an optical illusion."²⁸

Secondly, on the argument based on "presence," while it is possible to be connected via online media and be genuinely emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually involved without embodied physicality, such involvement would suffice under extenuating circumstances and not be the norm.

Chris Ridgeway, for example, argued that "a daily digital culture has shaped our interactions to the point that human presence is not synonymous with physicality. He adds that "we laugh and cry and express intimacy and frustration with a cross-cut of iMessage and emojis, Facetime and Instagram stories."²⁹ As

accurate as this position appears, digital relationships pale compared to physical ones in the real world. Regardless of the amount of digital communication that may have ensued in a day, husbands long to meet their wives physically, wives ache to be with their husbands, children long for the affection of their parents, and parents want to shower physical love on their children.

The abnormality of these times causes the consideration of virtual relationships as a substitute for physically embodied ones. If daily human relationships function this way, how much more should the spiritual relationship between Christ and his gathered church be? Believers are those who have been bought and brought into God's family to fellowship with one another. In the ideal sense, they should long to be together, physically see each other, sing together, fellowship together, commune together, among many other things that believers do together. Substituting this physical bond for a virtual relationship tells how individualistic and materially attached this generation has become. In the words of Bock and Armstrong, "when we speak of 'celebrating' the Eucharist, a celebration that minimally commemorates an occasion can hardly be said to be a celebration."³⁰ The real question to those arguing for online communion, both pre-COVID and post-COVID, is, "Why minimally commune in a virtual setting when communion can be fully celebrated in person?"

Thirdly, agreeably, if the pastor or minister does not perform any sacramental rites on the Lord's Supper, nothing stops the believer from partaking in it. While it is true that pastors perform no sacramental rites on the Lord's Supper, yet for the reasons stated above and three more reasons below, the Lord's Supper should not be administered online except in extremely unusual cases.

In the first instance, online communion advocates may have to explain in what sense they commune when they participate online. Paul notes that "because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf (1 Cor 10:17). The discord at the Corinthian church's Lord's table reflected the disunity within the church. This disagreement became more evident as they gathered and communed together. The impossibility of reconciling their differences became readily evident at the table. In this sense, the church's physical gathering in Corinth served as a measuring standard for communal existence. The question that online communion proponents must answer is how well virtual communions measure the church's communal existence.

Judging from the various methods that online participants have used in celebrating the Lord's Supper, the only one that comes close to affording believers the benefits of the gathered body is the "live within the service" model. Yet, even this method is only permissible if the church has exhausted all its options for physical meetings. Other methods, such as self-service or special Eucharist service on Facebook, ignore the realities of a gathered local body and the communal life that pertains to it. These models will only foster individualistic partaking of the Lord's Supper.

The subject of participation is closely related to the communal dimension. Another question online communicants may have to answer is, to what extent is online communion

²⁵ Deanna A. Thompson, "Christ is Really Present Virtually: A Proposal for Virtual Communion" March 26, 2020, *Lutheran Center for Faith, Values, and Community* <https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/> accessed April 1, 2021.

²⁶ Fiddes, "Sacraments in a Virtual World." June 2009, <https://www.frsimon.uk/paul-fiddes-sacraments-in-a-virtual-world/> accessed March 18, 2021

²⁷ Stephen R. Holmes, "Can the Eucharist be Celebrated in an Online Gathering? A Theological Analysis," *Journal of European Baptist* 23:2 (2023), 87-106.

²⁸ Bock and Armstrong, notes, chap. 7, no. 37, Kindle.

²⁹ Chris Ridgeway, "Online Church Can Still Be Sacramental," March 27, 2020. *Christianity Today* on

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/online-communion-can-still-be-sacramental.html> .

³⁰ Bock, and Armstrong, chap. 7, sec. 3, Kindle.

This paper has considered the trend to participate in communion online that became all the more polarized in the post-COVID church. Whereas arguments may be made for online participation in extenuating circumstances, physically partaking of the meal is the biblical and theological ideal and best represents what the meal signifies, namely, fellowship among believers.

1. "Advisory Opinion - Communion in an Emergency/Pandemic," PCUSA, edited March 24, 2020, https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory_opinion_communion_in_an_emergency_or_pandemic.pdf. 30 accessed March 18, 2021.
2. "Holy Communion and Online Worship" *The Methodist Church* <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/governance/faith-and-order/holy-communion-and-online-worship/> accessed Sept. 15, 2023.
3. "More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences," May 21, 2001, Barna Research Group <https://www.barna.com/research/more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences/> accessed March 18, 2021.
4. "Take Communion Online with Us," Saddleback Church, January 24, 2014, <https://saddleback.com/archive/blog/internet-campus/2014/01/24/take-communion-online-with-us> accessed March 18, 2021.
5. "What Is The Robloxian Christians?" The Robloxian Christians Online Church, <https://www.therobloxianchristians.org/about> accessed March 18, 2021.
6. Darrell L. and Jonathan J. Armstrong, *Virtual Reality Church: Pitfalls and Possibilities*. Chicago: Moody, 2021. Kindle.

- 38