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

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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.

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#### 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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 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 <a href="CC BY-NC">CC BY-NC</a> license



#### 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.<sup>2</sup> Well-meaning Christians engaged the chatrooms to discuss the Christian faith, thus using the chatrooms for communicative purposes.<sup>3</sup> Others started using email, "online listmeet" as a forum to meet at specific times and places.<sup>4</sup>

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.

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/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Bock, and Armstrong, chap. 3, sec. 1, Kindle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Caitlin Dewey, "A Complete History of the Rise and Fall—and Reincarnation!—of the Beloved '90s Chatroom," *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2014,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Bock, and Armstrong, chap. 3, sec. 1, Kindle.

missional with the intent to reach the remaining nine.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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." <sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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. Meanwhile, with the introduction of YouTube, more churches started streaming their videos online. Churches with

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

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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> 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, <a href="https://www.barna.com/research/more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences/">https://www.barna.com/research/more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences/</a>.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> 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).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Douglas Estes, *SimChurch: Being the Church in the Virtual World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 96.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Tim Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual*, *Community and New Media* (London: Routledge, 2017), 67; "History," The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life, <a href="https://slangcath.wordpress.com/about/history/">https://slangcath.wordpress.com/about/history/</a> accessed March 18, 2021; *The Robloxian Christians Online Church*, "What Is The Robloxian Christians?,"

https://www.therobloxianchristians.org/about accessed September 9, 2025.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Bock & Armstrong, chap. 3, sec. 2, Kindle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> John Dyer, "Digital Communion: History, Theology, and Practices" (March 23, 2020), <a href="https://j.hn/digital-communion-summary-of-theology-practices/">https://j.hn/digital-communion-summary-of-theology-practices/</a>.

church is tied to the administration of the sacrament of baptism and communion."<sup>13</sup> They add that the church's unity is best exemplified by its participation in the ordinances. However, they note that where one stands theologically about the ordinance and the constitution of the *ecclesia* will determine one's acceptance or rejection of the ordinance in a virtual church experience.<sup>14</sup>

During the pandemic and after, different denominations responded differently in how they administered the Lord's Supper. The Catholic Church decided to suspend all public celebration of the Eucharist rather than celebrate it online. This decision was not surprising with the Catholic's view of the Lord's Supper, which they restate thus: "virtual reality is no substitute for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.... There are no sacraments on the Internet." The Methodist church responded more progressively by allowing its local ministers and bishops to lead the communion online. However, the Methodist Church has vacillated in its opinion. The Presbyterian Church USA temporarily allowed online communion elements to be afforded to those who were sick.. Hence, the Lord's Supper could be celebrated online as an emergency measure.

<sup>16</sup> John P. Foley, "The Church and the Internet" (Rome Pontifical Council of Social Communication, 2002.) Paragraph 9, The Church and Internet (vatican.va) accessed September 11, 2025;

<sup>17</sup> Sam Hodges, "Both Green Light, Red Light for Online Communion," UM News, April 30, 2020, https://www.umnews.org/en/news/both-green-light-red-light-for-online-communion-2 accessed March 18, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Earlier in 2010, a Methodist minister, Tim Ross, had planned to conduct a communion service on Twitter but was asked to cancel the service. The issue was much debated subsequently, and the Methodist church suspended taking communion online to study the issue further. See Simon Jenkins, "Can Online Communion Be Real?," Church Times, August 25, 2020, https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2010/27august/comment/can-online-communion-be-real accessed March 18, 2021; Heather Hahn, "Moratorium, Study Urged on Online Communion," UM News, October 4, 2013, https://www.umnews.org/en/news/moratorium-study-urged-ononline-communion accessed March 18, 2021. The Methodist Church in the United Kingdom, because of the pandemic, permitted that the communion be taken online for a period they called 'a period of discernment.' This period supposedly lasted from August 1, 2021, till September 31, 2024. See "Holy Communion and Online Worship" The Methodist Church https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/governance/faith-andorder/holy-communion-and-online-worship/ accessed Sept. 15, 2023

19 "Advisory Opinion - Communion in an Emergency/Pandemic," PCUSA, edited March 24, 2020, <a href="https://www.pcusa.org/site\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory\_opinion\_communion\_in\_an\_emergency\_or\_pandemic.pdf.30">https://www.pcusa.org/site\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/advisory\_opinion\_communion\_in\_an\_emergency\_or\_pandemic.pdf.30</a> accessed March 18, 2021. Justin Martyr's *First Apology* about the middle of the second century, contains the earliest reference to the

However, these issues have been around before the pandemic. In 2019, Paul Fiddes argued for avatars taking communion. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church has already been giving the Lord's Supper online since 2014. Given the above, the pandemic only catalyzed an existing occurrence; participating in online Eucharist was already occurring across denominations, though at a minimal level with various formats. This section has briefly considered the practice of the Lord's Supper in the virtual church experience. The following section will appraise this practice.

#### Appraising the Virtual Lord's Supper

The incidents mentioned above suggest a divergence of opinions on celebrating the Lord's Supper virtually. While Catholics reject online celebration, other denominations holding a less sacramental view accept communion online either temporarily or permanently. Bock and Armstrong share this view when they note that on the theological spectrum, while transubstantionists have reasons to reject online Eucharist, the memorialist view presents the least theological obstacle to celebrating the Lord's Supper online. However, they question the extent to which a minimalist celebration of the Lord's Supper would still be considered a celebration. Thus, this section will further explore online Lord's Supper among low churches.

#### Low Church and Virtual Lord's Supper

Low churches that hold to a less sacramental and ritualistic view argue that since no clergyperson consecrates the elements, and there is no interaction with a priest or others through a practice like a shared cup, then the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper can translate online.<sup>23</sup> Some have also argued for online communion by redefining "presence" in a gathered community, holding that first, it is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies, and that God is omnipresent.<sup>24</sup> Others have argued that "it is possible to be virtually present to one

tradition of carrying the consecrated elements to members of the church who had been absent for services. Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 65, in *The Fathers of the* Church Vol 6, trans. Thomas B. Falls, (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 105.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Fiddes, "Sacraments in a Virtual World" June 2009, <a href="https://www.frsimon.uk/paul-fiddes-sacraments-in-a-virtual-world/">https://www.frsimon.uk/paul-fiddes-sacraments-in-a-virtual-world/</a> accessed March 18, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> "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.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Bock and Armstrong, chap. 7, sec. 3, Kindle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Ibid, 216—220.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Bock, and Armstrong, chap. 3, sec. 1, Kindle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Dyer, "Digital Communion: History, Theology, and Practices."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Clint Schnekloth, "A Terribly Geeky Sacramental Theological Case for 'Virtual' and De-Clericized Holy Communion" March 20, 2020, <a href="https://www.patheos.com/blogs/clintschnekloth/2020/03/a-terribly-geeky-sacramental-theological-case-for-virtual-and-de-clericized-holy-communion/">https://www.patheos.com/blogs/clintschnekloth/2020/03/a-terribly-geeky-sacramental-theological-case-for-virtual-and-de-clericized-holy-communion/</a> accessed March 31, 2021.

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

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." 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. <sup>27</sup>

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."<sup>28</sup>

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."<sup>29</sup> 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

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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Bock and Armstrong, notes, chap. 7, no. 37, Kindle.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Chris Ridgeway, "Online Church Can Still Be Sacramental," March 27, 2020. *Christianity Today* on

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Bock, and Armstrong, chap. 7, sec. 3, Kindle.

participation in the Lord's body and not just consuming it? Paul was angry with the Corinthian church because they ate the meal but failed to discern the body. By discerning the body, he referred not to the broken loaf before them but the gathered believers who have become one at the cross. To discern the body in the context of 1 Corinthians 11 is to know the locally gathered body thoroughly, to bear with them, and become one with them, collapsing the barriers of status and economy.31 In this sense, believers who gather together practically participate in each other's lives. On the contrary, virtual church attendees and communicants are consumers and not participants. Andy Huette describes this point when he contends that "virtual attendance fosters a consumer mentality. Yes, you can consume a sermon and stay 'in the know' via livestream, but you won't be able to fully participate in the joys, sorrows, and God-intended discomforts of family life. Church shouldn't be something we consume but something we participate in.",32

#### **Conclusion**

This paper has considered the trend to participate in communion online that became all the more polularized 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 represent what the meal signifies, namely, fellowshipping among believers.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Hamilton, 68-102.

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