

JORDAN COOPER

A Response to “In Defense of  
Christian Assemblies Gathering on  
the Internet for the Purpose of  
Receiving the Sacrament of the  
Altar”

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*First edition*

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# Acknowledgements

Though I took the lead in this work, I could not have produced this material without the help of others in this process. This paper was put together with the help of the following people:

Lisa Cooper, who edited this in various stages of production.

Matthew Fenn, who provided quotations and additional theological argumentation.

Lewis Polzin, who provided several changes and additions to the original draft.

# A Response to “In Defense of Christian Assemblies Gathering on the Internet for the Purpose of Receiving the Sacrament of the Altar”

## Introduction

**I**n response to the formulation of a statement from the Commission on Doctrine and Church Relations (CDCR) of the American Association of Lutheran Churches (AALC) regarding practices surrounding the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Lutheran congregations, Rev. Chris Rosebrough of Kongsvinger Lutheran Church, Oslo, Minnesota, presented a number of theses in opposition to one of the six points of

the drafted CDCR document.<sup>1</sup> The question at hand is the practice of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper through the presiding of a pastor and its reception by purportedly known “congregants” by means of the internet through Zoom or other videographical and streaming means. The statement of the CDCR rejects this as inconsistent with the Confessional requirements for the Eucharistic service, while Rev. Rosebrough argues for the consistency of consecration online with the Lutheran Confessions and Scripture. This paper is a defense of the position of the CDCR, and a response to the theses contained in “In Defense of Christian Assemblies Gathering on the Internet for the Purpose of Receiving the Sacrament of the Altar.”

## Some Preliminary Points

The argument presented in the document titled “In Defense of Christian Assemblies Gathering on the Internet for the Purpose of Receiving the Sacrament of the Altar,” (henceforth abbreviated as DCAG) consists of fourteen theses that argue that all requirements of a valid Eucharistic celebration can be fulfilled by means of a live-streamed service, with participants partaking of bread and wine at their own homes. While the argument as it is presented in each thesis is discussed below, it is

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<sup>1</sup> “In Defense of Christian Assemblies Gathering on the Internet for the Purpose of Receiving the Sacrament of the Altar” was sent in an email to all pastors in the AALC. The theses in their entirety are presented here, other than an aside related to whether Communion can and should be done in private or exclusively in public. This simply did not seem relevant to the issue at hand. Otherwise, throughout this document, the reader is able to see the entirety of Rosebrough’s argument. Rev. Rosebrough’s document can (at least at the time of writing) be found at this link: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/lh1kgy278gsozbu/In%20Defense%20of%20Internet%20Gatherings%20of%20Christ%27s%20Church%20and%20The%20Lord%27s%20Supper.pdf?dl=0&fbclid=IwAR2Q3SkMRRCeMWhNR9WR6ZSpPy7zyuIvpPctZuRcsN-BoBKpY5q63kOZ-Mw>

important first to lay out exactly what must be proven for the arguments of DCAG to result in the shifting of almost 2,000 years of consistent practice regarding Holy Communion.

The conclusion of DCAG presents a rather helpful summary of what it attempts to prove within these fourteen theses:

*This paper has sufficiently demonstrated from the Solid Declaration that the only requirements for a valid sacrament according to Christ's Command are a Christian assembly, bread and wine, a non-performative Verba either spoken or chanted by the pastor, distribution and reception. It has also been sufficiently demonstrated that all of these requirements can properly be met when a congregation assembles via the internet. Therefore, we can have absolute certainty that Christ's body and blood will be truly present even when a congregation gathers online due to the fact that Christ does not lie.*

It is to be granted that the elements necessary to a proper observance of the sacramental meal are all outlined here: Christian assembly, the proper elements, the Words of Institution, distribution, and reception. This much is clear both in the Scriptural accounts of the institution of the Sacrament and in the Confessional documents of the Lutheran Church.<sup>2</sup> What then is necessary to prove is the second statement, that "all of these requirements can be properly met when a congregation assembles via the internet." This is the crux of the argument. If it can be proven that these requirements can be met via the internet, then online Communion

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<sup>2</sup> See Chemnitz, Martin. *Examination of the Council of Trent*. Translated by Fred R. Kramer. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1978) II:249-250.

is an acceptable practice. However, the document fails to make any compelling case for this. In fact, DCAG begs the question throughout, that is, it assumes what it tries to prove.

Additionally, the burden is not for the CDCR to prove that an online consecration *isn't* valid, but upon DCAG to prove that it is. Whatever one may think about the validity of the practice, it cannot be doubted that this is indeed an innovation. When such a drastic innovation occurs with regard to the worship of the Church (and most specifically as related to the ministry of Word and Sacrament), it must be proven that this innovation is indeed a good and proper one, and, as regards the Lord's Supper, that it is necessary for the life of the Church.

A final point to be made here before engaging the material directly is that this issue of online Communion is not endemic to the AALC. With so many churches having to broadcast their worship services in the era of COVID-19 restrictions, a number of other Confessional Lutheran church bodies have seen it necessary to respond to the practice of online consecration and reception. As these issues were discussed, the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS), the Lutheran Church–Canada (LCC), and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), have all released statements which reject the practice.<sup>3</sup> The argument of DCAG offers a position which diverges not only from the CDCR of the AALC, but also of the doctrinal committees and church leadership of the largest Confessional Lutheran church bodies in North America. While it could be the case that all of the theologians and pastors involved in making these doctrinal claims are wrong, this would require a rather powerful

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<sup>3</sup> The WELS document can be found here: <https://wels.net/god-feeds-his-flock-in-a-time-of-crisis/>

The Lutheran Church–Canada has given advice here: <https://www.canadianlutheran.ca/a-letter-from-lcc-president-to-our-pastors-april-21-2020/>

Finally, documents from the CTCR of the LCMS can be found here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5122917ce4b08a7615958803/t/5efa07f5c70ae81e6c9c3ace/>



argument to prove such a thing.

With these points in mind, what follows is a response to each of the theses in DCAG. Some of the points made here do not merit lengthy interaction, as they are restatements of Confessional principles which are to be granted by both sides of this debate. It is the implications drawn from these ideas which is the main point of critique. Throughout this paper, the theses and statements from DCAG are in italics, and presented exactly as rendered in the original text.

## An Examination of the Theses

### Thesis 1

*“No human words or works create the true presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Supper,” including “the merit or the speaking of the minister” –  
— Formula of Concord SD VII 74*

*Consecration of the elements, in the narrow sense of the bread and wine including both the body and blood of Christ, does not occur by the speaking of the pastor.*

Certainly, no one who approaches this issue from a Confessional perspective doubts that it is God, rather than the pastor, who brings forth the body of Christ upon the altar. While the pastor speaks *in persona Christi*, this is not due to the gift of an indelible character unique to the ordained priesthood, as is the Roman view. Through the speaking of the *verba*, God uses the voice of the minister, in the speaking of the divine Word, to consecrate the elements. In other words, the “speaking” of the pastor is the instrumental means by which the elements are consecrated.

## Thesis 2

*There is only one Verba that effects consecration in the narrow sense and that is the one and only Verba spoken by Jesus in an upper room in Jerusalem on the night that He was betrayed, roughly 2,000 years ago. In other words, there is “One Verba to Rule Them All”.*

*“The true and almighty words of Jesus Christ, which He spoke in the first institution of the Supper, were not only effective in the first Supper; they remain so. They retain their validity and power and are still effective, so that in all places in which the Supper is observed according to Christ’s institution and his words are used, the body and blood of Christ are truly present, distributed and received **on the basis of the power and might of the very same words that Christ spoke in the first Supper.**” — Formula of Concord SD VII 75*

*Fact: All the elements used in every modern church are separated from this one and only performative Verba by both a significant distance and nearly two thousand years of time.*

There is, again, no real debate to be made here. All instances of the gathering of the church to receive the Eucharistic meal are a participation in Christ’s first Supper, just as it is also an anticipation of the final Supper of the Lamb, both feasts most appropriately called “The Lord’s Supper.” Christian Baptism, similarly, is a participation in Christ’s own Baptism. Also, the sinner’s justification is a sharing in the divine verdict placed upon Christ at his resurrection. All soteriological benefits which the Christian receives in time are connected to the *historia salutis* realities of Christ’s own life, death, and resurrection.

None of this, however, addresses the issue of online Communion. The mere fact that the saving realities that we participate in today are divided from their foundation in Christ—in both time and place—does not speak to whether considerations of time, place, and circumstance

are important for the Church's participation in those realities today. It is true that the elements and verba are separated in time and space from Christ, but that does not imply that we can be separated in time and space from the elements and verba. Those considerations come from the commands of Christ surrounding the church's continued celebration of the Eucharist.

\* \* \*

***This is further clarified in the subsequent paragraphs in SD VII***

*"For wherever what Christ instituted is observed and his words are spoken over the bread and cup and wherever the consecrated bread and cup are distributed, Christ himself exercises his power through the spoken words, which are still hjs [sic] Word, by virtue of the power of the first institution." — Formula of Concord SD VII 75*

This quote from the Solid Declaration explicitly ties the celebration of the Sacrament to its observance together in physical places, while the thesis in DCAG interprets it to mean the opposite. While the translation in DCAG uses the term "wherever," the Latin of the Formula is far more specific, as it uses the phrase: "*in omnibus locibus*," or "in all places."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the explicit requirement of the confessional documents cited here for a valid celebration of the Supper necessitates an *actual* place.

Further, the SD speaks about a physical location for the Words of Institution and *also* of the distribution; neither can be separated from

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<sup>4</sup> This translation is reflected in the more recent publications of the Book of Concord, i.e. CPH's "Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions" and Kolb/Wengert. The last major translation to use "wherever" in this place is Tappert.

the other. There is no indication in the Formula that there could be understood here anything other than a connected location in which both the consecration *and* the distribution occur. This also raises the question as to whether there can really be a distribution at all if one is alone at home.<sup>5</sup> It is hardly common parlance to speak of my giving myself something as a distribution. To be clearer, self-communing is simply not a historically Lutheran practice in any context other than the pastor doing so in preparation for his distribution of the Sacrament to the congregation.<sup>6</sup>

DCAG must prove that the internet is a "place." What has been assumed since the age of the internet is that, when meetings or conversations occur, it is multiple individuals "meeting" in separate and diverse locations. There is no shared space as the internet has no individual location. While the *lingua franca* of the internet allows for the verbiage of "meeting online," suggesting a place, none would assert that there is a geographical location for any such "gathering." As such, an internet gathering does *not* fulfill the Confessional requirements here for a valid Eucharist. While the pastor consecrates, he is in a physical location which differs from that of the communicants. When separated individuals gather in an internet "meeting room," there is no actual shared space at all. There is not even a singular computer to which all congregants are connecting. Rather, an internet meeting room involves the sending of signals from each person's separate computer to the

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in his *Church Order*, Chemnitz speaks of the Supper as that which "is given to us by the hand of the minister, and received with our mouth." Chemnitz, Martin. *Church Order*. Works of Martin Chemnitz Vol. 9. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> While one can argue that if two people were gathered together on one side of a computer screen with the pastor on another, they could receive from the other person the body and blood of Christ, as this paper rejects the fact that the elements before them are actually consecrated, it is rejected that they are receiving the body and blood of Christ and merely, only the elements.

other specific computers with which people are connected. The term "room" used to describe this is not accurate as to what is happening digitally when a meeting occurs. The use of localised language to describe interaction on the internet is metaphorical. This is, again, a case of the *lingua franca* providing words for what is otherwise lacking.

For online Communion to be consistent in any way with the Confessions on this point, one would have to radically transform the way in which the idea of space is to be understood. That would not be a language issue, but a philosophical one. DCAG comes nowhere near making such a case, as it fails to even discuss the nature of places, or of the internet in general, which is precisely what has to be proven.

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*"[A]s Chrysostom says in his Sermon on the Passion, "Christ prepares this table himself and blesses it; for no human being makes the bread and wine, which are set before us, the body and blood of Christ. Rather Christ himself, who was crucified for us, does that.*

*"The words are spoken by the mouth of the priest, but when he says, "This is my body," the elements that have been presented in the Supper **are consecrated by God's power and grace through the Word**. Just as the saying 'be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth' [Gen. 1:28] was said only once and yet is continually effective in nature, causing it to grow and multiply, **so these words were said once. But they are powerful and do their work in our day and until his return**, so that in the Supper as celebrated in the church his true body and blood are present. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Genesis 1:28 — Formula of Concord SD VII 76*

*This then forms the basis as to why a pastor's speaking of the Verba does*

*not performatively effect consecration in the narrow sense.*

*“So, it is not our work or speaking but the command and ordinance of Christ that make the bread the body and the wine the blood, beginning with the first Lord’s Supper and continuing to the end of the world.” — Formula of Concord SD VII 77*

There is no disagreement on these points. Regardless of exactly how the pastor’s proclamation of the verba and Christ’s words at the Last Supper are connected, there still remain specific requirements regarding the context in which the minister is to speak the verba. According to both the Solid Declaration and the Words of Institution themselves, this includes a shared place.

### Thesis 3

*When the Verba spoken in the context of Christ’s Instituted Supper, Jesus Himself ATTACHES His Verba and His Work to the minister’s words and thereby the Son of God, **not the pastor nor his speaking**, effects the presence of His body and blood in the supper.*

*“Likewise, “Here, too, if I were to say over all the bread there is, ‘This is the body of Christ,’ nothing would happen, but when we follow his institution and command in the Supper and say, ‘This is my body,’ then it is his body, not because of our speaking or our declarative word, but because of his command in which he has told us to speak and to do **and has attached his own command and deed to our speaking**.” — Formula of Concord SD VII 78*

There is, again, no disagreement here. The question comes down to the proper context into which Christ has established his promise, which is an in-person worship service gathered in the Triune name.

## Thesis 4

*The reasons why the Verba must be spoken (or chanted) despite not being performative are*

- 1) in obedience to Christ's command*
- 2) to arouse faith within the recipient*
- 3) for the purpose of sanctifying and consecrating the elements.*

*"In the administration of the Holy Supper the Words of Institution are to be clearly and plainly spoken or sung publicly in the congregation, and in no case are they to be omitted. This is done, first, **so that Christ's command, "Do this," may be obeyed.** Second, it is done so that Christ's words will arouse, strengthen, and confirm the hearers' faith in the nature and benefits of this sacrament (that is, the presence of Christ's body and blood and the forgiveness of sins, and all the benefits that have been won for us by Christ's death and the shedding of his blood, which are given to us in his testament). Third, it is done so that the elements of bread and wine are sanctified and consecrated in this holy practice, whereby Christ's body and blood are offered to us to eat and to drink, as Paul says [1 Cor. 10:16\*], "The cup of blessing that we bless ..." This of course takes place in no other way than through the repetition and recitation of the Words of Institution. — Formula of Concord SD VII 79–82*

*"the recitation of the Words of Institution of Christ by itself does not make a valid sacrament"— Formula of Concord SD VII 83*

This thesis, like the last, brings up things that are agreed upon by everyone who holds to a Lutheran Confession. In the Solid Declaration, as quoted above in DCAG, the authors contend that the celebration of the Lord's Supper is to be obeyed according to Jesus's own command when he says: "Do this." Contextually, the question may then arise: "Do what?" What exactly is it that constitutes the "this" which the Church is to do? And, if we answer that question, we then must ask

if online Communion fulfills those requirements. We must examine exactly where the "do this" language appears in Scripture. It shows up in two texts: the Gospel of Luke and 1 Corinthians. Let us first look at Luke. The author writes:

And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:14-20 NKJV)

The context of this Supper is one of physical intimacy, as the apostles are seated together for the Passover meal. In this physical location, Jesus—the one who presides over the meal—distributes the cup and the bread. It is exactly the same bread which is held by Jesus and broken by him that is then given to the apostles. The same elements over which the Words of Institution are spoken are then those which the apostles receive bodily.

The position of DCAG does not adhere to the clear "do this" command of Jesus, and instead takes the position that only *some* of the elements of the Last Supper are to be repeated by the congregation in the sacramental



meal. The physical location that is shared is gone. The connection between officiant and communicants is severed. The identification of the *verba* with the specific and local elements shared, personally, in front of the congregation is removed.

Consider the Words of Institution themselves. The pastor states "this is my body" when standing *in persona Christi*. What exactly is the "this" in that sentence? Traditionally, it is the bread which is upon the altar that the pastor consecrates. However, there is no valid linguistic use of the term "this" to indicate multiple items at the same time that are separated from the pastor and local congregation by thousands of miles. In order to have any coherent meaning in the phrase then, should not the pastor then say, "That is my body," referring to the objects seen on the computer screen? Even if the pastor were to say, "This is my body," over the internet, he must, by a theological, didactic necessity, in that very moment, say, "'This bread is my body,' (pertaining to the bread the pastor is holding) but also the bread that is in your hands is his body... 'This cup is the new testament in my blood,' (pertaining to the cup of wine the pastor is holding) but also the cup that is your hands is his blood." This, of course, would change Jesus's words, which would rightly be rejected by those who affirm DCAG. By keeping the Words of Institution as they are (by using the word "this"), however, the pastor consecrating online is then not really speaking of anything other than that which is directly in front of him. It also changes the entire ceremony of the Lord's Supper.<sup>7</sup>

The second instance of the "do this" language in connection with the Lord's Supper is in 1 Corinthians 11:24, where the Apostle Paul recites what had then become, and remains today, the standard sacramental language in the church. Throughout this chapter, Paul deals with abuses

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Melancthon's definition of a sacrament as a ceremony with the promise of God attached Ap XXIV:16-18 and Ap XIII:3.

of the Lord's Supper, wherein some people in the congregation were taking bread and wine away from others and even getting drunk during the service. This is, of course, only possible to do through actual, physical intimacy. Physical local meeting was the only context in which the Lord's Supper would be celebrated. Further, Paul identifies the Communion service as "when you come together." (1 Cor. 11:33-34) It is a complete misuse of language to identify Paul's meaning as applicable to anything other than physical gathering.

Further, Martin Chemnitz articulates his view of precisely what "do this" references, and in doing so, outlines elements which simply *cannot* be done through an online service. This is especially important as it is Chemnitz who wrote article VII of the Solid Declaration which DCAG cites on multiple occasions. Thus, if there is anyone who can most clearly interpret the intent of SD VII, it is Chemnitz. In his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, he writes: "For the institution of the Supper prescribes the action thus: To take bread and wine, bless, offer, receive, eat, and add this work of Christ: 'This is My body; this is My blood,' and to do all this in remembrance of Him."<sup>8</sup> It is exactly the same bread which is blessed that is then distributed, received, and eaten. This cannot not occur in an online service.

The context of Chemnitz's discussion here is essential to understand, as it is deeply relevant to DCAG's divorce of consecration from reception. This section of Chemnitz's work is a refutation of Rome's divorce between the time of consecration, and the time of consumption. For Chemnitz, the entire act is a unified one, and must be done as prescribed by Christ in the Last Supper with his apostles. What DCAG proposes here is a tearing apart of these elements of the Communion service, not by time (as was the medieval practice) but by space. Chemnitz explains further: "These things are so clear and certain that there is no escape

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<sup>8</sup> Chemnitz, *Examination*, II:249.

from them by any trickery, if only we hold firmly to this basic principle, that the institution is the norm and rule from which and according to which all such questions and disputes are to be decided.”<sup>9</sup> As the institution includes a physical participation in bread and wine which is blessed, distributed, and received, this is the standard which the church is to follow.

In his continued argument, Chemnitz claims that:

[T]he blessing of the Eucharist and the promise of the presence of the body and blood of Christ ought not to be torn apart and forcibly separated from the use which is prescribed and commanded in the institution. For it is of the blessed bread, which is distributed, received, and eaten, that Christ asserts, “This is My body.”

To make his case even clearer, Chemnitz then contends that, “[U]nder no pretext whatsoever should there be instituted, added, or amplified a use of the Eucharist other than the one which has been prescribed and commanded in the institution.” He then adds that the model used in the New Testament defines “In what manner [Christ] wanted His church to use the Eucharist until the end of the world.”<sup>10</sup> No matter what developments occur with technology throughout history, the church does not have the freedom to innovate surrounding the fundamental elements of the Lord’s Supper.

A final point to be expanded here is the straightforward nature of the Words of Institution themselves. It has always been the argument of the

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<sup>9</sup> Chemnitz, *Examination*, II:249.

<sup>10</sup> Chemnitz, *Examination*, II:250.

Lutheran Reformation that it is only a straightforward reading of the verba which is to be accepted within the church. While the discussions on this topic have most often been focused on the "is" of "this is my body," there have also been disagreements between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions surrounding the referent "this."<sup>11</sup>

WELS theologian Adolf Hoenecke gives a helpful overview of these debates in his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*.<sup>12</sup> The author begins by citing the Socinian *Racovian Catechism*, which identifies "this" with the entire sacramental act including the breaking of bread and its reception. Andreas Carlstadt proposes (in a rather odd argument) that when Jesus says "this," he is really speaking about his physical body in front of the apostles, rather than anything in the sacrament. The Reformed argue, similar to the Socinians, that the "this" is the whole sacramental act. In contrast to this, Hoenecke contends (along with the rest of the Lutheran tradition, extending back to Luther), that when Jesus says "this" he is *not* speaking of the entire sacramental act, but of the bread in front of him. Chemnitz notes likewise, "For it is of the blessed bread, which is distributed, received, and eaten, that Christ asserts, 'This is My body.'"<sup>13</sup>

The problem with the argument of DCAG here is that the only way in which "this" could refer to something so separated from the minister is to identify the statement not with the local elements themselves, but with the sacramental *act*, which is the only thing that could be said to be present both where the pastor is and where the bread and wine are. This runs contrary to the entire Lutheran tradition, which has never understood the Words of Institution in this way. The traditional

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<sup>11</sup> I must give some credit to Rev. Dr. Eric Phillips on this point, as I began thinking through this after seeing some discussion with him on the matter.

<sup>12</sup> Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Translated by Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier. (Milwaukee: Northwest Publishing, 1999), IV:116-119.

<sup>13</sup> Chemnitz, *Examination*, II:249.

interpretation of the verba (which is at the heart of the Lutheran Reformation) simply *cannot* be reconciled with an online Eucharist.

In summary, DCAG ironically continues to cite statements in the Lutheran Confessions which militate against the practice of online Communion. This is clear in Chemnitz's own interpretation of the words that he wrote. Even more foundational than the Lutheran Confessions—in Scripture—the two instances where "do this" language occurs, it is apparent that the "this" includes a physical gathering and eating and drinking together. Further, the very nature of the phrase "This is my body" necessitates a host which is actually present with the pastor. This is clear in the historic Lutheran understanding of the verba from Luther unto the present day.

## Thesis 5

***Whenever and wherever the supper is observed as Christ has instituted, according to His command to "do this" then we can have absolute confidence that we are receiving the true body and blood of Christ because Christ remains truthful to His words and He cannot and does not lie.***

*"But if the words remain, as is right and necessary, then by virtue of them the elements are truly the body and blood of Christ. For as Christ's lips speak and say, so it is; he cannot lie or deceive." — Formula of Concord SD VII 23*

This thesis essentially repeats the content of the previous thesis. It is the burden of the proponent of online Communion to prove that the authors of the Formula allow for any use of spatial language to refer to anything other than actual in-person Eucharistic services. Further, this statement also includes the "do this," phrase which was addressed above.

## Thesis 6

*Our Confessions clearly identify those things that are Biblically and necessarily prescribed in order to fulfill Christ's command to "do this", they are...*

*1) A Christian Assembly, **wherever they are assembled (this includes an internet meeting room)***

*"For **wherever** what Christ instituted is observed and his words are spoken over the bread and 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." — Formula of Concord SD VII 75*

The entire argument of DCAG stands or falls on whether or not Christian assembly in a place includes the internet. Rather than making such a case, however, DCAG simply includes it as a bare assertion in a parenthesis. This is not defended, nor can it be. Granted, the authors of the FC could not have conceived of an online forum where people from all over the world could speak to each other in real time, however, if the authorial intent of the authors of the Formula of Concord means anything whatsoever, it is completely indefensible to make the assertion that they had in mind anything other than physical locations in the language of "wherever," which, again, is not an accurate translation of the Latin that more specifically mentions *place*.

## Thesis 7

*When all five of these requirements are met as Christ has commanded, **wherever** they are done and in all places they are done, we can confidently believe that Christ attaches His Verba and Work to the pastor's recitation of the Verba and elements so that what is received is the True Body and Blood of Christ.*

*"For wherever what Christ instituted is observed and his words are spoken over the bread and 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." — Formula of Concord SD VII 75*

*"as Chrysostom says in his Sermon on the Passion, "Christ prepares this table himself and blesses it; for no human being makes the bread and wine, which are set before us, the body and blood of Christ. Rather Christ himself, who was crucified for us, does that."*

It is frankly quite amazing that DCAG continues to cite the clear language of the Lutheran Confessions surrounding the tying together of the celebration of the Sacrament and "places." There has yet to be a single argument that "place" would include anything other than a shared physical location.

## Thesis 8

*Matthew 18:20 make it possible for Christians to assemble at an internet meeting place (this fits within the definition of "wherever" and "all places" see Thesis 7). A congregation has the freedom to gather together for the purpose of holding the Divine Service in an internet meeting place.*

***The service begins with the invocation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Therefore, as Christ has promised He Himself is truly present. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20)***

Yet again, there is a mere parenthetical reference to a "place" being something which is not actually a place at all. This time, DCAG references the previous thesis as if any argument in support of such an idea is made there. As discussed, it is not. Further, this thesis cites the promise of Jesus's presence in Matthew 18:20, which, again, is a reference to a spatially connected gathering of multiple people in his name. Certainly, Christians are all connected even when apart (all being the body of Christ), but Jesus speaks of a special kind of gathering that is in his name. The contention of DCAG is that an internet gathering fulfills the requirements to be this kind of meeting. As Jesus was contextually and obviously speaking in local terms, one would need to make a compelling argument that this idea extends far beyond what seems the obvious intent. Such has not been proven.

## Thesis 9

*1 Corinthians 5:1–5 challenges the narrow definition of a Christian Assembly that restricts someone's presence in the assembly unless they are "physically" present: Paul writes, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*

***For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. When you***



*are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."*

*Note: The Apostle Paul was present with the Corinthian assembly even though he was NOT physically present.*

It is only here that any argument is actually presented that spatial language in the church gathering can refer to more than a physical location. Yet, there are several problems with this argument.

The most obvious problem is simply that the text referenced in 1 Corinthians says nothing whatsoever about the Lord's Supper. Paul has much to say in the same letter about the abuses in the Corinthian church related to the Sacrament, but gives no indication of his having any presence in the service in such a context. There is no reason to take a text speaking of something completely unrelated and apply this to some kind of online presence in the celebration of the Sacrament.

The second issue here is that Paul is not literally making a claim that he is somehow truly spiritually present with the Corinthian church. Paul is speaking specifically about the nature of his authority in the case of church discipline that the congregation is involved in. Lutheran theologian Henry Eyster Jacobs writes of this passage:

On the basis of this text, we have the general principle, that no act of discipline be determined upon, either by the congregation alone, or by the ministry alone, but by the judgment of both. The absence of Paul is provided for by his written authorization and verdict. Thus he is present in Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, though Paul is not physically present, his authority over the congregation remains due to his Apostolic office. This has nothing whatsoever to do with the question of online Communion.

Third, the idea that one can have some kind of real presence in a sacramental service merely spiritually while physically absent is the fundamental point of Reformed sacramental theology. When Calvin argued that Christ's humanity was physically absent from the communicant, yet spirituality present in faith, this proposal was unanimously rejected by the authors of the Formula of Concord. Either Christ's human nature is actually here, or it is not. There is no absent partaking of Christ's humanity. Yet, this is exactly the logic used here in the DCAG. In fact, DCAG takes what the Lutheran Confession reject, that Christ is not physically present but spiritually, and applies it to mortal beings, that mortal beings can be spiritually, if not physically present. To say that one can be somehow spiritually present while physically illocal, which is the claim of DCAG, is to affirm the basis of a Reformed sacramentology.<sup>15</sup>

## Thesis 10

*When the Lutheran Confessions describe the work of those in the pastoral office as speaking the Verba publicly or 'speaking over'. These are descriptive phrases rather than prescriptive and do not constitute an additional item that*

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<sup>14</sup> Jacobs, Henry Eyster. *Annotations on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans and 1 Corinthians 1-6*. Lutheran Commentary Series. (Ithaca, NY: Just and Sinner, 2019), 410.

<sup>15</sup> This denial of the necessity of physical locality bears resemblance to the ancient Gnostic heresy, which denied that Jesus assumed a physical human nature. In DCAG though, we have the body of Christ, (i.e. the church), being understood after a gnostic fashion. A virtual communion with a virtual church gives a virtual Christ.

*must be done in order to order to fulfill Christ's command to "do this".*

*Note that in large churches some of the elements are not present on the altar during consecration and may in fact be located in the choir loft or at distribution stations during the Words of Institution. In such cases, the pastor could spatially be under these elements and the only contact the elements have with the pastor is through church's PA system and he also has no part in distributing these elements.*

The point at issue here is not about whether having "distribution stations" within a congregation's sanctuary (where the pastor is also physically present and is presiding over the Sacrament) is a valid practice or not.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, in these circumstances, Holy Communion does occur within the actual physical space of the congregation. Though, it is true that the pastor's voice is amplified by a PA system, this is not usually done because the pastor is completely inaudible, but so that more clarity might be brought to the words spoken/chanted by the pastor in the actual presence of the sanctuary.

## Thesis 11

*Denying that Christ can or will attach His Verba to the pastor's if the pastor and Christian assembly gather at an internet meeting place which thereby requires the pastor to be physically present to speak The Verba puts the emphasis on the pastor, rather than Christ regarding who effects the change in the elements. Requiring the pastor's physical presence also creates unbiblical*

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<sup>16</sup> These practices of "distribution centers" are not at the heart of the refutation of this argument, but it does not appear that these practices have at their core a principle that can be defended in the Confessions.

*and needless obstacles for Christian assemblies in the internet era and runs counter to 1Cor 5:1–5 and focuses on the Pastor’s physical presence rather than Christ’s presence which is unequivocally promised when two or more gather in His name.*

Christ did not arbitrarily place his promise in the bare words of the verba, but in a particular context for a specific purpose.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned in the drafted CDCR statement, we recognize that the verba itself, even with elements of bread and wine, would not be a valid Eucharist if it was spoken by children who were playing church at home, or if it was set up for a scene in a movie. The intent to gather in a particular place with a specific end (that is, to receive the body and blood of Christ), is necessary for the sacrament. Part of that context is, as in every single instance of Holy Communion in Scripture, a physical proximity to one another, and to the pastor who distributes the elements. To say that the pastor must be physically present is not to “put the emphasis on the pastor” but just to say that we must do what Christ actually commanded.

## Thesis 12

*The use of the argument “There is no Emergency Communion” is a theological construct that was intended to make a distinction regarding why a layperson could baptize but not preside over the Lord’s Supper.*

*It is therefore a misuse of this distinction to forbid a rightly called pastor to preside over the Lord’s Supper when a congregation assembles in a meeting room on the internet.*

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<sup>17</sup> As noted above, Melancthon sees the promise of God attached to a ceremony, not just bare verba.

This supposed "theological construct" is part of a broader theological understanding of the nature of the Lord's Supper and its necessity for Christians. If the Supper were an absolute necessity, then it is true that we would allow laity to consecrate the elements in exigent circumstances. Similarly, we would insist on the distribution of Communion to young infants, and all who are of the faith, no matter their level of instruction or assent, so long as they did not deny that which our Lord commands we use to examine ourselves before reception. However, this has clearly never been our practice.

The Lutheran Reformers recognize that, though the Supper is to be an essential part of the Christian's life, there is an eating in faith that exists apart from the Sacrament. It is this that the church has emphasized at times of plague or when Christians were otherwise prevented from gathering in person. The Formula of Concord states:

There is a twofold eating of Christ's flesh. One is spiritual, which Christ describes especially in John 6:54. This "eating" happens in no other way than with the Spirit and faith, in preaching and meditation on the Gospel, as well as in the Lord's Supper. By itself this is useful and helpful, and necessary for all Christians, at all times, for salvation. Without this spiritual participation the sacramental or oral eating in the Supper is not only not helpful, but is even harmful and damning.

This spiritual eating is nothing other than faith. It means to hear God's Word (in which Christ, true God and man, is presented to us, together with all benefits that He has purchased for us by His flesh given into death for us, and by His blood shed for us, namely, God's grace, the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life). It means to receive it with

faith and keep it for ourselves. It means that in all troubles and temptations we firmly rely—with sure confidence and trust—and abide in this consolation: we have a gracious God and eternal salvation because of the Lord Jesus Christ. (FC SD VII.61-62)

In other words, even though going for a time without the Supper is not something that any Christian should find desirable, in circumstances wherein regular partaking is an impossibility, one can be assured, by faith, that we still partake of Christ.

This understanding is the historic way to explain what the church does in times where meeting is impossible. We do not have the freedom to innovate by changing the very nature of the Lord’s Supper in such circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

## Thesis 13

*Our Confessions, which are true because they say the same thing as scripture, do not require the physical presence of the pastor nor does it require that a Christian congregation only meet in person in order for Christ to attach His Verba to the pastor’s recitation of the Words of Institution. Our confessions, and by extension scripture itself, requires the Verba to be spoken (or sung). Therefore, to require the physical presence of the pastor is to add to our confessions by adding an additional prescribed element to the requirement*

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<sup>18</sup> Rev. Matthew Fenn has written up an article on this topic here with several quotes on the subject: <https://thekeysofstpeters.com/2020/04/15/easter-newsletter-can-you-e-at-christ-without-the-lords-supper%E2%80%A8/>

*to Christ's "do this" while simultaneously denying that Christ is truly present wherever two or more are gathered in His name.*

This is simply false as DCAG itself cited that according to the Formula of Concord, it is only in the context of the gathering of the church in a place where the Sacrament is celebrated. As mentioned previously, the phrase "do this," is stated with reference to the entirety of the act of the Supper which includes distribution and partaking together in a shared physical space. DCAG continues to assume that anyone with the historic view has the burden of proof. This is exactly backward from how liturgical or ecclesial innovation is introduced into the church; it must be shown that the innovation brings the Word of God to its hearers better or more clearly.

## Thesis 14

*As stewards of these mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1) and because it is necessary that men who are in the pastoral office not commune those who ought not be communed by virtue of the Office of the Keys, it is therefore an abdication of this stewardship granted by the Holy Spirit to permit consecrated elements to be distributed to those who would receive The Supper to their harm or those who are under the ban or who have been excommunicated from the church.*

*Therefore, consecration via an open "live stream" or pre-recorded service on a social media video or on a DVD **cannot under any circumstances be used for the purposes of having the Lord's Supper.** It is for this reason that Kongsvinger shuts off our livestream when we celebrate the Lord's Supper and it is also for this reason that I was very disappointed when The AALC kept the livestream open during the Divine Services that were observed at the 2020 Convention.*

*A service conducted using a technology such as GoToMeeting or Zoom may be employed for the purposes of celebrating the Lord’s Supper but those who should not be communed should either be removed from the meeting room or put in a waiting room during the observance of the Lord’s Supper just like how the ancient church would dismiss those who could not or should not receive the supper from the Divine Service prior to the communion liturgy commencing.*

It is rather odd that the DCAG would criticize the AALC National Convention for keeping their livestream on during the Holy Communion service.<sup>19</sup> Live Eucharistic services have been aired for decades on Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), radio, and public access stations, as well as Lutheran services held on public television and the like. The author of this paper is unaware of any widespread practice of holding bread at home with the idea that when a priest or pastor speaks the Words of Institution, they are now in possession of the Eucharist. This is because, in most contexts, it is understood that this is not consecration, but one is instead *watching* a consecration. The AALC National Convention did not at all operate under the assumption that anyone at home would have had bread and wine present, believing that the consecration in a live-streamed worship service had any relevance to the elements at their own homes.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> If this is a stumbling block for Christians today—and this paper is not prepared to admit that it is—perhaps more time should be dedicated toward this subject. This paper is not the place for a deeper excursus into it.

<sup>20</sup> The practice of pastoral discipline and the withholding of the Lord’s Supper from one or more who are “gathered” for a service such as defended in DCAG is also an excursus that cannot be pursued for the fact that this paper rejects the idea that an online meeting can be held to distribute the Lord’s Supper at all. Thus, this point is rather unimportant to the larger conversation.



## On the Regulative Principle of Worship

One final point to note here is that, in conversations with Rev. Rosebrough since these theses were first presented, the argument has been set forth that those who contend for a strict adherence to Christ's words promote the Reformed "regulative principle of worship," which is opposed to the Lutheran "normative principle."<sup>21</sup> According to Rosebrough, the normative principle allows for anything to be done in worship which is not expressly forbidden. Thus, since online Communion is not explicitly forbidden, it should be allowed.

This is simply not the traditional Lutheran principle of worship. The language of a normative principle is generally that of Reformed sources that critique Luther's approach to worship. Even a cursory look at Luther's writings on the subject or Chemnitz's *Church Order* shows this to be a misunderstanding. Though there is an element of freedom when it comes to the structure of a worship service, that freedom has limits which are prescribed by Scripture, and the church has always emphasized the importance of the traditions which have been passed down to the church in the future, especially as found in liturgical practice. This bound freedom is subject to the Scriptures *especially* when it comes to the Sacraments,

For example, in Johann Gerhard's explanation of the first commandment, he can simultaneously say that there is Christian freedom in doing things like having images in a sanctuary (though within limits, as their worship is forbidden),<sup>22</sup> while also stating that it is a sin "when one worships God in a way different from how He commands in His

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<sup>21</sup> As one example, this argument was made on Twitter in response to Matthew Fenn's rejection of online consecration. (date, time)

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard, Johann. *On the Law of God and On the Ceremonial and Forensic Laws*. Translated by Richard J. Dinda. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2015), 77.

Word that He be worshiped." Again, he writes that, "[A]ll self-chosen acts of worship are species of idolatry, for whoever worships the true God otherwise than God in His Word commands that He be worshiped prefers the thoughts of his own heart to the Word of God and thus to God Himself."<sup>23</sup> While there are some freedoms in worship, that freedom is not absolute. There certainly is not freedom to fundamentally alter the nature of the church or of the Sacrament by replacing in-person gatherings with virtual meetings.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper began with a statement from the conclusion of DCAG about exactly what was said to have been proven to demonstrate the validity of Holy Communion observed over the internet. Having now examined each thesis here, let us revisit that statement:

*This paper has sufficiently demonstrated from the Solid Declaration that the only requirements for a valid sacrament according to Christ's Command are a Christian assembly, bread and wine, a non-performative Verba either spoken or chanted by the pastor, distribution and reception. It has also been sufficiently demonstrated that all of these requirements can properly be met when a congregation assembles via the internet.*

The theses in DCAG have not sufficiently demonstrated such a thing.

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<sup>23</sup> Gerhard, On the Law of God, 64.

<sup>24</sup> This is further clarified in Chemnitz argument in his *Examination of the Council of Trent* as discussed in response to Thesis 4. Chemnitz argues that the church cannot deviate from the mode of celebration as instituted by Christ at the Last Supper, and as observed by the New Testament church.

Looking at each element of the provided definition of a valid Lord's Supper, let us consider if the definition has been properly defended by DCAG:

*A Christian assembly.* This is the root of the argument, and it has not been proven. In the context of the New Testament and in the writings of the Book of Concord, there is no indication whatsoever that a Christian assembly can possibly mean anything other than an in-person gathering.

*Bread and wine.* This is also absent from online Communion, as it is the bread which is consecrated that is also distributed. The very nature of the words "This is my body" identify an object that is local. Therefore, though there is bread and wine in front of the pastor and, presumably, the person in front of their computer screen, the linguistic construction of the verba does not allow for the elements in front of a viewer at home to be consecrated elements.

*The verba.* Again, though the words themselves come out of the mouth of the pastor, they are disconnected from the elements from which congregants partake the Lord's Supper, therefore rendering those elements linguistically differentiated from the verba. As they are, therefore, not spoken of, they are not consecrated.

*Distribution.* By the nature of the distance between people involved, there can be no distribution. The pastor/Communion assistants of whatever kind simply *cannot* distribute through a computer.

*Reception.* The participant cannot receive from the bread that is held by the pastor in the local congregation through the distribution, and thus there is no reception apart from picking up and eating their own bread and drinking their own wine, which has not actually been consecrated in front of the pastor.

The definition of every single element of the service of the Sacrament is drastically altered by this proposal for online Communion in DCAG. These fourteen theses not only fail to prove this rejection of the entire

historic church's approach to the Lord's Supper, but also positively nature of sections of the Book of Concord which prove exactly the opposite.

This proposal for online Communion should be met by nothing other than outright rejection. It is not only improper, but invalid. It purports to change the nature not only of the Sacrament, but of the church itself.