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This is my Body …

A Lutheran perspective on the Eucharist, digitalization, mediality, and presence[1]

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Abstract: In times of the Covid-19 pandemic, many congregations had to stop celebrating the Eucharist or find new ways to do so – one of these being online Eucharist services in synchronous and diachronous settings. The article describes developments in the Protestant Churches of Germany and shows that the interplay of theology and church practices is essential. On the background of the fundamental dialectics of absence and presence in (Christian) liturgy and Luther's writings on the Lord's Supper, the article proposes two axes that open up a 'field' of diverse ritual practices: *community* and *gift*. Many different ways of celebrating the Lord's Supper seem to be possible in this field – also celebrations in synchronous digital settings (video conferences). The Covid-19 crisis is seen as a chance to rethink sacramental theology *and* ways of celebration – in the context of a permanent change of liturgical practices.

Keywords: Eucharist – Lord's Supper – Digital Eucharist Services – absence/presence – German Protestant Churches – Luther – Liturgical Theology.

1. In the Midst of the Crisis – Some Reflections on Where We Are

Three times in his life, Karl Barth was asked to write an article for the journal *Christian Century* on the question: "How my mind has changed?". They were published in 1938, 1948, and 1958.[2] More than half a century ago, it seemed enough to ask theologians every ten years how their minds had changed. Today, in the context of

1. The following article is a slightly revised version of a lecture delivered at the LUMEN-workshop "Eucharist – presence – mediality" on March 24, 2021. I am very grateful for the invitation and the chance to deliver a lecture and publish it here.
2. Karl Barth. "How my mind has changed?". *Evangelische Theologie* 20 (1960): 97–106.

an ongoing crisis theologians' minds might change in much shorter intervals.[3]

This is, at least, what I can say personally. My mind has changed in many ways in the past months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Early in 2020, I wouldn't have thought that *liturgical presence* could be experienced digitally; today, I am absolutely convinced that we can celebrate online worship *in real presence*. In the first weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic and the first lockdown in Germany in March and April 2020, I was one of those who argued for Eucharistic fasting in times of crisis. Today, I do not only think that we should not continue to fast any longer, but that there are excellent theological arguments for celebrating the Eucharist/the Holy Communion in a digital video-conference format, and that these online celebrations are practically an inspiring possibility to rediscover the Sacrament. My mind has undoubtedly changed, and I am sure it will continue to do so in the weeks and months to come.[4]

In what follows, I will methodologically combine an analysis of practices and theology, and I will share many open questions that I have as a Lutheran Practical Theologian, who is at the same time the director of the Institute for Liturgical Studies of the United Lutheran Church of German[5] and the head of the Liturgical Council of the Lutheran Church of Germany.5 What I write, is not an official church position. And it would be very difficult to formulate such a position in the context of Lutheran Churches in Germany today: There is a wide range of theological arguments and practices in German Lutheranism concerning the question, whether Holy Communion is possible via digital media or not. I mention two extreme possibilities: the Lutheran churches of Hannover and Saxony.

In early March 2021, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Saxony published advice for celebrating Holy Supper.[6] The plea was to continue to celebrate or to restart the celebration of the Eucharist as soon

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3. The article was – as mentioned in note 1 – presented in March 2021. I finished the written version of it on November 27, 2021 – in a time, in which the number of infections raised drastically in many European countries.

4. Cf. Alexander Deeg. "Es wird nicht mehr sein wie vorher. Überlegungen zum Gottesdienstfeiern in Zeiten der Corona-Pandemie und danach." *Pastoraltheologie* 109 (2021): 417–435; Alexander Deeg."Solches tut … "– Sieben Thesen zur Abendmahlfeier in Corona-Zeiten." *Pastoraltheologie* 110 (2021): 123–138; Alexander Deeg. "Gottesdienst in ‚Corona-Zeiten' oder: Drei Variationen zum Thema *Präsenz*." *Evangelische Theologie* 81 (2021): 136–151.

5. Cf. www.velkd.de/ liturgiewissenschaftliches-institut-leipzig.php (seen 26.11.2021).

6. An updated version (May 2021) can still be found on the church's website (seen 27.11.2021).

as possible. The Church of Saxony does not even mention digital possibilities – and the main idea is to return to the practices before the pandemic if possible in the context of our hygiene regulations. Especially the single and communal chalice (Gemeinschaftskelch) plays a central role – as the Church declares that only with a single chalice the Sacrament is celebrated "stiftungsgemäß" (according to Jesus' institution). In July 2021, the Synod of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Saxony affirmed this position and declared explicitly:

> Die Feier im Gottesdienst der Gemeinde bleibt insbesondere aufgrund der wichtigen leiblichen Dimension die Regelform. Einer digitalen Abendmahlsfeier fehlen demgegenüber wesentliche Elemente einer stiftungsgemäßen Abendmahlsfeier, so dass wir zu dieser Form nicht raten können.[7]

What is astonishing here is – in my view – not primarily the hesitation towards digital Eucharist services, but (a) the repeated argument with Jesus' institution and (b) the lack of differentiation and perception: The Covid-19 pandemic showed impressively that 'Sunday services of the congregation' exist in manifold and also digital ways; and at the same time there has never been 'the' digital way of celebrating Holy Communion, but different ways of doing so: e.g., in videoconferences or services broadcast via *YouTube*.

On the other hand, the Bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Hannover, Ralf Meister, declared already in November 2020 that celebrating the Eucharist digitally seems very well possible for him.[8] The Church discussed this question again in its council of Bishops and published the far-reaching paper *Der Schatz der Christusgegenwart in digitalen Formen des Abendmahls*!? in March 2021 declaring digital Eucharist services as possible (even when they are celebrated via YouTube, that is to say: in individual contexts and not at the same time).[9]

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7. *Wort der Landessynode zu Verständnis und Praxis des Abendmahls*, Dresden, 10. Juli 2021, https://engagiert.evlks.de/fileadmin/userfiles/EVLKS_engagiert/B._Landeskirche/Landessynode/2021-Fruehjahr/Wort-der-Landessynode-zu-Verstaendnis-und-Praxis-des-Abendmahls.pdf (seen 26.11.2021). My own translation: The celebration [of the Holy Supper] in Sunday services of the congregation remains the rule because of the important bodily dimension. In digital Holy Supper celebrations, essential elements of a celebration according to its institution are lacking, so that we can't advise this practice.
8. Cf. *Evangelische Zeitung*. 27.10.2021. https://www.evangelische-zeitung.de/bischof-meister-haelt-digital-gefeiertes-abendmahl-fuer-moeglich/ (seen 26.11.2021).
9. Cf. Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannovers. 2021. https://www.michaeliskloster.de/damfiles/default/michaeliskloster2-0/arbeitsbereiche-

Saxony and Hannover are both *Lutheran* Churches and mark the poles of an intensive liturgical and theological discussion in German Protestantism.

Liturgical Fluidity – or: Somewhere in the Desert

In January 2021, the Lutheran pastor in Hamburg Matthias Lemme used a metaphor during an online conference on liturgical digitalization and saw all of us "*in the desert*" – as we, according to Lemme, have left Egypt but are not yet in the Promised Land. We are somewhere in between. There is something we left behind – and, of course, it is a good question whether it is correct and fair to compare what we left behind to 'Egypt'. There were many good things we had and did in our worship services before the Covid-19 crisis. For example did we celebrate Holy Communion with a big shared cup ("Gemeinschaftskelch") for all participants, a single chalice – surely a great symbol for the unity of sisters and brothers in Christ (from the days of John Chrysostom and Gregor the Great until March 2020, although there were discussions again and again about communion cups – especially in the so-called "Kelchbewegung", a Communion Cup Movement around 120 years ago).[10]

The other side of Lemme's metaphor: We are on our way and have not reached the Promised Land yet. And – as we read in the Torah – it is not easy to live in the desert and to remain moving with all the obstacles and detours. Some wish to go back to Egypt as soon as possible, back to where we were. On the other side, some celebrate the new liturgical freedom we have and clearly say: "Die Agende ist tot!" ("Our Book of Worship is dead!"). And: "After having experienced the freedom of online worship and the inclusiveness I experience in a Zoom service, I never want to sit in a church in rows (like in a bus) listening to one pastor standing in the front, many meters away from me."[11]

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themen/abendmahl/pdfs-abendmahl/Grundsaetzliches/Digitales-Abendmahl-Impulspapier-2021-03-12-V2.pdf-59f65b8641a1fc57996f4e339beb0a95.pdf (seen 26.11.2021).

10. Cf. Friedric Spitta. *Die Kelchbewegung in Deutschland und die Reform der Abendmahlsfeier*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1904. Friedrich Spitta's main argument against *one* chalice for all participants is that the hygiene is problematic and that good disinfection of the chalice would be necessary, but is not possible. But as a New Testament scholar, there is another argument: Spitta is convinced that historically Jesus and his disciples used individual chalices when they drank together at the last meal in Jerusalem – as is the common practice in Jewish Passover-meals until this very day.

11. This is what a participating pastor said in an online consultation.

The desert is a threshold, an in-between-space.[12] We had to leave former security and break open somehow stable theologies. In my view, we should not try to leave this unsettling zone too soon but productively use this time of *liturgical fluidity*.

The Interplay of Theology and Church Practices

In these fluid and dynamic times, there are chances for worship and liturgical reflections (in the midst of a pandemic, which is terrible and should never be whitewashed by trying to see its chances and the interesting reflections it provokes). We have the opportunity to discover the theology of worship and Eucharist anew and to gain experiences with different forms and practices of worship. Theology and church practices are always interconnected, and our task as theologians is to work on this relationship and to reflect on the interplay of theology and church practices.[13]

There were times in Church History in which theological reflections and ideas preceded practical innovations. In many aspects, the Reformation can be seen as such a time. The theological (and spiritual!) discoveries of Martin Luther and the other reformers resulted in vast liturgical transformations – and some of them appeared years after the interruption of theological thoughts – e.g., Luther's reform of the Latin and German Mass in 1523 and 1526.

In the context of the Eucharist/the Holy Communion, the 1970s were – at least in my German context – a period in which new theological insights resulted in a vast transformation of the practices of celebrating the Eucharist. Holy Supper was rediscovered in an ecumenical context and seen anew as Eucharistic celebration and prolepsis of God's Kingdom. The communion of all people celebrating and the political dimension of Eucharist was freshly taken into account, thus overcoming a typical Protestant reduction of Holy Supper to an individual soteriological event. New forms of celebrating the Eucharist were established following these theological insights. Especially the *Kirchentag* in Nürnberg (in 1979) was a starting point; in the years to come the kneeling banks used for Holy Communion were removed in most Protestant churches in Germany. People nowadays stand in a circle or half-circle around the altar; they feel free to touch the chalice and take the wafers or the bread in their hands. Some-

12. Cf. especially Victor Turner's famous descriptions of "liminality" in Victor Turner. *Das Ritual. Struktur und Anti-Struktur*. Frankfurt/Main/New York: Campus Verlag 2000.
13. Cf. Alexander Deeg & David Plüss. *Liturgik*. Lehrbuch Praktische Theologie 5. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2021, 164–166.

times (before the Covid-19), they shook hands after the Eucharist, thus trying to stress the relevance of 'horizontal' communion as the result of the vertical communion with Jesus Christ and in the body of Christ. In some contexts, the combination of satiation meal and ritual meal was rediscovered (Feierabendmahl). Theological and practical transformations went hand in hand.[14]

My impression is that in these days of crisis, it is the other way round: We start with *practical* transformations – and it is important that *theological* reflections follow. It is possible to enter the circle (or the spiral) of theology and practice from any side, but it is essential to enter it and realize that celebrating the Eucharist *in a different form* also means *celebrating a different Eucharist*.

In Germany, there were not many Protestant congregations which celebrated Eucharist at all in the first months of the pandemic. A spontaneous survey during the above-mentioned online conference with pastors in January 2021 showed that 45% of the pastors said that they had not celebrated Holy Communion since March 2020 in their congregations, 25% stated that they celebrated sometimes, 8% regularly in physical co-presence; only 8% said that they sometimes celebrated digitally, none of the pastors declared that they had regular digital Holy Supper celebrations in their congregations.

A study published in June 2020 entitled *Digitale Verkündigungsformate während der Corona-Krise. Eine ad-hoc-Studie im Auftrag der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland* based on four regional churches in Germany asked if there were digital Holy Supper-celebrations during the Covid-19 crisis. 12% of the participants said "yes", 63% "no", and 25% did not answer – a strikingly high number, which may point to the insecurity of many pastors and congregations about the (im-)possibility of celebrating Eucharist online.[15] In a follow-up study including the second lockdown and the time between the first and the second lockdown, the result was that a little less than 20% of the congregations stated that they celebrated Eucharist digitally.[16]

For many Protestants in Germany, the Covid-19 pandemic went hand in hand with Eucharistic abstinence. The congregations which

14. Cf. Alexander Deeg. "Essen, was wir sind. Oder: Die Politik des Abendmahls." *Kerygma und Dogma* 66 (2020): 140–156.

15. Daniel Hörsch. *Digitale Verkündigungsformate während der Corona-Krise. Eine ad-hoc-Studie im Auftrag der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, https://www.mi-di.de/materialien/digitale-verkuendigungsformate-waehrend-der-corona-krise, 2021, 36. (seen 27.11.2021).

16. Cf. Daniel Hörsch. 2021. *Gottesdienstliches Leben während der Pandemie. Verkündigungsformate und ausgewählte Handlungsfelder kirchlicher Praxis. Ergebnisse einer midi-Vergleichsstudie*, https://www.mi-di.de/materialien/gottesdienstliches-leben-waehrend-der-pandemie, 17. (seen 27.11.2021).

celebrate Holy Communion in physical co-presence are bound to the hygiene regulations. In many Catholic congregations in Germany Eucharist was and is celebrated *sub una*, and the wafer is sometimes distributed with forceps. This practice can be found in some Protestant congregations as well. Of course, a practice like this is undoubtedly *not* fitting to the theological insights, which shaped the transformation of Holy Communion in the 1970s stressing the communion and the celebration. There is a new fixation on the materiality of a holy substance distributed to individuals – which (in my eyes) looks like distribution of medicine, but surely not like a meal we share and enjoy together.

Just one more example: In Southern Saxony, a Lutheran pastor 'invented' a form of celebration, in which he celebrates the Eucharistic liturgy *alone* in the sacristy – with open doors to the congregation, who may be present in small numbers in the Church. After having finished the celebration, congregants are invited to come separately to the sacristy door to receive wafer and wine individually. This is also a radical shift not only in the practice of Holy Communion, but also in its theology.

In my view, liturgical theology should be done in an *abductive way*, in a permanent interrelation of describing practices phenomenologically *and* reflecting on them theologically. The term 'abduction' was coined by Charles Sanders Peirce to describe a form of logical argument that overcomes the duality of either inductive or deductive epistemologies. Inductive ways of arguing would start with concrete cases and find general principles; deductive epistemologies would start with theoretical principles and adapt them to practical cases. The idea of abduction is that new, daring, provocative ideas may be formulated, which should then be tried out empirically and thoroughly thought through at the same time. Abduction is thus a way of dynamizing the duality of induction and deduction.[17] Applying this to liturgical theology is exactly the constant combination of phenomenological perception of liturgical celebrations *and* theological reflection of their underlying logic.

17. Cf. Alexander Deeg. *Das äußere Wort und seine liturgische Gestalt. Überlegungen zu einer evangelischen Fundamentalliturgik*. APTLH 68. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2012, 61–71.

2. Presence and Absence in Analogue and Digital Contexts

It is all about presence … A Lutheran perspective on Worship and Holy Communion

Lutheran liturgical theology stresses the importance of *presence*. Lutheran worship is all about *presence*: the presence of Christ and the active and participative presence of the congregation; every Worship service is celebrated expecting the salvific presence of Christ amid the congregation.

It is essential for Luther and the other Reformers not to try to relate presence with problematic practices. The presence of Christ cannot be located in any form of *cultus exterior*, of the exterior worship cult stabilized by Church's hierarchy. It cannot be found in outward materializations of the consecrated bread, but only in the interaction, participation, and involvement of every congregant, in the interrelation of word and sign and faith, in which the living voice of the Gospel, the *viva vox Evangelii*, can be heard anew. The body of Christ becomes alive amid the words of institution *and* the congregation's participation – and the body of Christ is never alive without the celebrating congregation, but only amid the congregation and *as* the celebrating congregation.

In Luther's *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528)[18] he differentiates three forms of presence: physical, spiritual, and heavenly.18 The sacramental presence of Christ in the elements can only be understood as a heavenly presence, which remains a mystery, but is 'real' at the same time. For Luther, it is essential that this 'real presence' does not mean a local inclusion of the body of Christ 'in' the materiality of the elements, but is and remains connected with Jesus Christ himself, more precisely with His word of promise. Luther differentiates "thettel wort" and "heisselwort", words describing an 'action' and words connecting this with God's promise (Verheißung).[19] The words of Jesus Christ "This is my body" are for Luther clearly "heisselwort", words which become 'real' in the presence of the one, who did not only speak them in the past, but continues to speak them whenever the congregation does what he commanded them to do. This is (in my view) a critical aspect arguing for the possibility of a mediated presence in digital contexts. Christ's presence is not connected with

18. Luther, Martin. 1528. *Vom Abendmahl Christi. Bekenntnis*. WA 26, 261–509.
19. Luther, Martin. WA 26, 283f.

the practice of sharing the '*same*' food, but with the practice of hearing His words of promise, eating, and drinking together.

There is maybe no one in Protestant Theology who formulated this interrelation of congregation and Christ's presence more pointedly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his dissertation *Sanctorum Communio* using the formula: "Christus als Gemeinde existierend", "Christ existing as a community".[20] The Reformers never wanted to stress the medium (or the outward form), but wanted to emphasize the main question, if communion/community (with God and with the others who celebrate) can be experienced and if participation is possible.

If it is all about *presence*, we should be very careful in our discussion in order not to confuse two meanings of presence.

Presence – in analogue and digital contexts

When we speak about "Präsenzgottesdienste" in Germany, we usually mean worship services celebrated in physical co-presence in a church building. And sometimes the discussion seems as if the Reformers' concentration on *presence* and the celebration in physical co-presence go hand in hand – with the consequence that some people think that only "Präsenzgottesdienste" are 'real' services in a theologically grounded sense of the word. What we have here is an equivocation in our use of 'presence'.

But when we reduce Präsenzgottesdienste to physical co-presence, we neglect that there is presence also in digital contexts. Yes, it is a different presence, but it is, in my view, presence! And the task of Practical Theology, Systematic Theology, and Liturgical Studies should be to describe as precisely as possible different aspects of presence in digital and analog settings.

Worship services in physical co-presence are just one form of worship services celebrating God's and the congregation's presence in a multimedia reality. Nathan Jurgenson speaks about "digital dualism", the separation of online- and offline-worlds. According to Jurgenson, this dualism refers to the perception, especially of older people, but it does not fit the experience especially of younger people, who do not separate their world in two, but live in a "reality-virtuality-continuum" and in a constant mixed reality.[21] Using a smartphone, e.g., is

20. Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Sanctorum Communio. Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*. hg. v. Joachim von Soosten. DBW 1, Gütersloh/München: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2005, 87.

21. Cf. Bernd Irlenborn. "Die Liturgie im Zeitalter ihrer medialen Reproduzierbarkeit. Systematisch-theologische Überlegungen zu Online-Gottesdiensten." In: *Online zu Gott!? Liturgische Ausdrucksformen und Erfahrungen im Medienzeitalter*,

not leaving one world (the analog world) and entering another world (the digital one), but is an extension of the reduced possibilities of the own body.[22]

At the same time, the digital world is not a *disembodied* world, as some argue. Helmuth Plessner's famous sentence: "Wir sind unser Leib und haben unseren Körper differentiates between body as the material dimension (Körper) and body as the starting point of all human perception (Leib).[23] *As* bodies (Leib) we are also part of digital communication, we sense and feel our body. We feel pain or feel tired, we are happy or even excited sitting or standing there and being part of online communication.

Of course, it is correct to say that the way we participate is different – and especially the olfactory and the sensory element of human perception is reduced or impossible. But still: It is a bodily experience – also in digital worship. We may even be 'closer' to what happens in worship in a bodily dimension – an aspect which was discussed quite often in the last months in homiletic contexts. The preacher may be much 'closer' in digital worship services, as the camera approaches him or her in a way congregants would never dare in a physical co-present setting; thus, the question of authenticity is a different one.

The primary reduction of online communication might be that we do not experience the 'space of worship' as we would in a church building. The experience of entering a 'space' is lost or at least different. The atmospheres connected with spaces and especially 'holy spaces' are at least not the same.[24] I still think that Walter Benjamin's essay from 1935/36 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is an exciting starting point to describe what Benjamin

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eds. Stefan Kopp & Benjamin Krysmann, 105-129. Kirche in Zeiten der Veränderung 5, Freiburg i. Br.: Herder 2020, here 109-112. The term "Reality-Virtuality-Continuum" comes from Paul Milgram and Fumio Kushino cf. Berger, Teresa. 2018. *@Worship. Liturgical practices in digital worlds.* London/New York: Routledge, 16.

22. Cf. Antonio Sparado (SJ). *Cybertheology. Thinking Christianity in the Era of the Internet*. New York: Fordham University Press 2014, 72f.. These reflections are based on Marshall McLuhan who studied e.g. the influence of the use of microphones in liturgical settings. Sparado is convinced that the bodily dimension of the use of the internet changed rapidly since the invention of touch screens.

23. Quoted in: Emmanuel Alloa, Thomas Bedorf, Christian Grüny & Tobias Nikolaus Klaus. "Einleitung." In *Leiblichkeit. Geschichte und Aktualität eines Konzepts*, eds. Alloa et al. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2019, 2.

24. Cf. Hermann Schmitz. *Der Leib, der Raum und die Gefühle*. Bielefeld/Locarno: Edition Sirius 2019, 46–80; Gernot Böhme. *Leib. Die Natur, die wir selbst sind*. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2019, esp. 50–60.

calls the "aura", which is connected with "truth", "uniqueness", "authority", and especially with the "here and now".[25]

To summarize this point: Yes, it is all about presence in Protestant worship, but presence should not be restricted to physical co-presence, but can be experienced in digital spaces (digitalen Räumen) as well (although the term 'digital space' is a bit problematic, as one of the things which are lost is – as shown – especially the experience of 'space'!).

One side-note: Even presence in a shared meal is possible in a mediatized digital form. I admit that I learned this from a McDonald's advertisement broadcast in the weeks before Christmas 2020.[26] McDonald's wanted to surprise one of the workers of the company, who came from abroad and was not able to celebrate Christmas together with his family and loved ones in South-East Europe because of the Covid-19 restrictions. So, McDonald's invested, rebuilt his mother's living room in a van, asked her to share the recipe of her usual Christmas meal, cooked it – and invited the worker to a shared meal in the truck *with* the family abroad who was digitally present and ate mother's Christmas meal at the same moment. It is, in my view, a very touching video and it is somehow eye-opening for the discussion about Eucharist: Shared co-presence is possible, even if we are not physically co-located (Berger 2018, 38f.).

3. Eucharist/Holy Communion in German Protestantism 2020/2021 – Some Observations

The combination of two logics in the past 40 years: individual soteriology and celebration of communion

The traditional Protestant logic of the Eucharist, which was dominant for almost 400 years (although it may not have been Luther's first idea, as I will argue), was the logic of *individual soteriology*. The Holy Communion was part of a practice of repentance and a penitential liturgy; it was predominantly connected with a confession of sins,

25. Walter Benjamin. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, 166-195. Boston/New York: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2019.
26. McDonald's 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ks3DvonVVs (seen 26.11.2021).

and the tasting of bread and wine was the absolution not just heard, but eaten and drunk.

The Eucharistic movement, which started in the 1970s, did not remove this logic altogether or replace it with a totally different one. It is still there in German Protestantism, but at the same time, a new logic was discovered (or better: rediscovered, as it is an old logic!): the celebration of Communion and community. Somehow both logics are combined today, which works quite well for some participants, but not for others – for those who miss their traditional penitential meal and for those who have their problems with a soteriological coined celebration of the Holy Communion. In practice, it is this combination of two different logics which leads to uncertainties: How joyful should the celebration of the Holy Communion be? What is the attitude and tune of the celebration? Do people receive wavers or 'real bread'?

A Short Rereading of Luther's "Treatise concerning the blessed sacrament of the holy and true body of Christ and concerning the brotherhoods" (1519)

With the recombination of two logics, we are somehow back at the point where Luther started to rethink the Eucharist in his 1519 text: *A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and concerning the Brotherhoods*. In this treatise, Luther points out:

> The significance or purpose of this sacrament is the fellowship of all saints, whence it derives its common name *synaxis* or *communion*, that is fellowship; and *communicare* means to take part in this fellowship, or as we say, to go to the sacrament, because Christ and all saints are one spiritual body; just as the inhabitants of a city are one community and body. [27]

Those who receive the sacrament are Christ's spiritual body – together with "all saints" transcending any borders of time and space, but also breaking down all walls and fences between the congregants. The *synaxis* is the communion of all the citizens of Christ's city. Partaking of the sacrament means being connected with Christ, his suf-

27. Quoted according to: Luther, Martin. 1519. A Treatise Concerning the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and Concerning the Brotherhoods (translated by J.J. Schindel). https://www.checkluther.com/wp-content/uploads/1519-A-Treatise-Concerning-the-Blessed-Sacrament-of-the-Holy-and-True-Body-of-Christ-and-Concerning-the-Brotherhoods.pdf (seen 25.11.2021).

ferings, and his resurrection, but also with the sufferings of the whole congregation, the whole body of Christ. The *communion* is about our sin and God's grace, yes, but it is at the same time about our way of living together as the body of Christ:

> There your heart must go out in love and devotion and learn that this sacrament is a sacrament of love, and that love and service are given you, and you again must render love and service to Christ and His needy ones.[28]

What happens in the sacrament is – according to Luther 1519 – that "we are changed into one another and are brought into fellowship with one another by love, without which there can be no such change".[29] Luther describes the dynamics of the sacrament in a theological *and* sociological context.[30] And he even ridicules those who ask themselves strange questions about the when and how and why the materiality of bread and wine changes.

It is part of the problem of the developments of the 1520s that this interrelation of theology and sociology somehow got lost – and the theological question about the way to describe the presence of Christ correctly became the main focus of the Eucharistic controversy between Luther and Zwingli (and others). Luther focused on the combination of hermeneutics and soteriology – especially in his 1527 work *That These Words of Christ, "This is my Body, etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics*. We are not informed in detail about Luther's practices of celebrating Holy Communion in these years, but it may be the case that this theological shift caused a change in practices again – reducing the aspect of community and concentrating on the words of institution and their performative dimension.

Celebration Today in German Protestantism: A new Differentiation of the two logics?

The recombination of two logics – this is where Luther started in 1519, and this is (in my view) where we were (at least somehow) in our Protestant rediscovery of the Eucharist since the 1970s. And it is my fear that this is what we might lose today. The two logics – community and soteriology – seem to be separated again, and especially the 'old', individualized soteriological model becomes influential due

28. Ibid., 9.
29. Ibid., 14.
30. I tried to work out the political dimension of Luther's 1519 reflections cf. Alexander Deeg. 2020.

to the necessary reduction of celebrating the Eucharist in physical co-presence in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Holy Communion may again look like an individual distribution of medicine. As practice and theology are interrelated, the shift of practices also changes theology – and we should be careful what we do. Is what we see in some contexts the re-invention of a salvific material instead of the interrelation of faith, community, and Christ's presence in personal faith and communal practice?

But digital ways of celebrating Holy Communion may also be problematic in this sense. Already during the first lockdown in March/April 2020, some congregations uploaded *YouTube* videos showing a pastor saying the words of institution and suggested that people at home prepare bread and wine and use these videos in order to celebrate the Eucharist.

I see this as a problematic way of celebration. The "here and now" is lost completely; there is no congregation – but you may be all alone with the video (or in a small group sitting at home). What is even more problematic in my view: It is each and every individual who decides if they want to celebrate now – and does so. Eucharist may somehow be transformed into a 'self-service'-event. In addition: the words of institution spoken by the pastor are removed from their context and transformed into some almost magical words, which are thought to become 'effective' in a mediated way. The problem is not that it is digital – but the problem is that it loses the dimension of gift and donation and the dimension of communion/community.

Another problematic logic some share in our Protestant churches in Germany would be: We continue our Eucharistic fasting. The argument behind this plea for fasting might be that Protestants do not really 'need' the sacrament as they have all they need in the *word*. Holy Supper would then be something like a ritual redundancy. I do not want to ridicule this position, which is quite popular in German Protestantism. Many Protestants in Germany do not miss the celebration of the Holy Supper.

Thus, the question should be asked again: Why do we celebrate the Eucharist? It was Peter Brunner who gave a strikingly simple answer around 70 years ago: We celebrate, because Jesus commanded us to do so. In Brunner's own words:

> Ich weiß nicht, warum ich gerade diese Gabe des Abendmahls brauche. Jesus Christus weiß es allein. Nur aus seiner Stiftung weiß ich, daß ich

> diese Gabe brauche, aber aus diesem Grunde weiß ich es mit absoluter Gewißheit."[31]

Brunner's answer is circular. I do not have to find good reasons for celebrating; I do not even have to say how much it means for me; I do not have to stress my faith experiences connected with the Holy Supper; I do not have to argue why it is more than a lecture of a Biblical text or a sermon. It is simply to do what Jesus commanded us to do.[32]

In my view, Brunner's argument stands for the externality of our faith as a gift connected with the Holy Supper. Celebrating the Holy Supper interrupts our logics – and even our logics of explaining why the Eucharist should be celebrated. It interrupts the life of the congregants and their permanent circles of self-relatedness, their existence as *homines incurvati* in themselves.

What I described so far are problematic ways of celebrating the Eucharist in times of the Covid-19 pandemic in my German context. But there are, of course, many other forms of celebrating which try not to lose the theological insights of the past decades.

Just two examples:

(1) There are services where the congregants receive an arrangement with a little bit of wine and some bread. The congregation remains seated – with enough distance from one another. They eat and drink together and are reminded of a 'real meal' they share with others. The Bavarian pastor who regularly celebrates in this form says: "Well, people somehow like and enjoy it, although it is a bit like receiving food in an airplane."

(2) In some congregations, people celebrate with little bags they receive – looking like bags for a snack on the way (which might be quite a fitting metaphor for Holy Supper!). In this bag, people find a little

31. Peter Brunner. "Zur Lehre vom Gottesdienst der im Namen Jesu versammelten Gemeinde." In *Leiturgia Bd. 1: Geschichte und Lehre des evangelischen Gottesdienstes*, 83-361. Kassel: Joh. Stauda Verlag, 186. My own translation: I do not know why I should need this particular gift of the Holy Supper. Jesus Christ alone knows it. It is only his institution through which I know that I need this gift, but for this reason, I know it with absolute certainty.

32. Actually, this argumentation can be compared to Karl Barth's circular way of stating why the Biblical canon is the canon. He writes in KD I/1: "[…] die Bibel macht sich selbst zum Kanon. Sie ist Kanon, weil sie sich als solcher der Kirche imponiert hat und immer wieder imponiert" (Karl Barth. *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes. Prolegomena zur Kirchlichen Dogmatik*, KD I/1. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich 1975, 110).

bit of bread and a single grape – which they can take to their seats and enjoy together.

From my perspective, celebrating the Eucharist in online video conferences is an excellent possibility: 'Zoom-Eucharists'. People prepare wine and bread before the service. In the liturgy, it seems essential that the congregation sees one another (which means that there should not be too many participants, and their videos should be on). The participants are gathered at the same time in one digital room and are able to interact. Liturgically it is important – in my view – to stress the offering of bread and wine and to give thanks for them (actually stressing one aspect which was central to Eucharist liturgies in the times of the Old Church of the first centuries – and was only reduced when the sacrificial logic became more and more dominant).[33] The words of institution are spoken by an ordained pastor, the congregation prays the Lord´s Prayer together – and then the eating and drinking is opened by a word of invitation, e.g.: "Und jetzt nehmt Euch Zeit, esst und trinkt: Christi Leib für dich gegeben. Christi Blut für dich vergossen."[34]

This way of celebrating stresses the role of the congregation and the words of institution. In a Lutheran context, it is never the 'material' alone which is relevant, the 'one' bread and wine which is there in the hands of the ordained pastor, but it is the 'est' of the *verba testamenti* (This *is* my body; this *is* my blood!) connected with the elements. It is God him- or herself, who acts in his:her spirit when people hear the words of institution and receive the body and blood of Christ. It is all about what God does – as the Formula Concordia says:[35]

> Das die ware gegenwertigkeit des Leibes und Bluts Christi im Abendmahl nicht schaffe einiges menschen wort oder werck, es sey das verdienst oder sprechen des Dieners oder das essen und trincken oder glaub der Communicanten, sondern solches alles solle allein des Allmechtigen

33. Cf. Anselm Schubert. 2018. *Gott essen. Eine kulinarische Geschichte des Abendmahls*. München: C.H. Beck, 31–50. 89–94.
34. This is the wording of an "Orientierungshilfe" of the Evangelical Church of Hessen and Nassau.
35. The Formula Concordiae (Formula of Concord) was written in 1577 and belongs to the symbolic books of the Lutheran Churches in Germany (and other countries), but not to the symbolic books of the Lutheran Church of Denmark. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche: Vollständige Neuedition*, ed. Irene Dingel. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2014 (= BSELK), vol. 2.

> Gottes krafft und unsers Herrn Jesu Christi wort, einsetzung und ordnung zugeschrieben werden.[36]

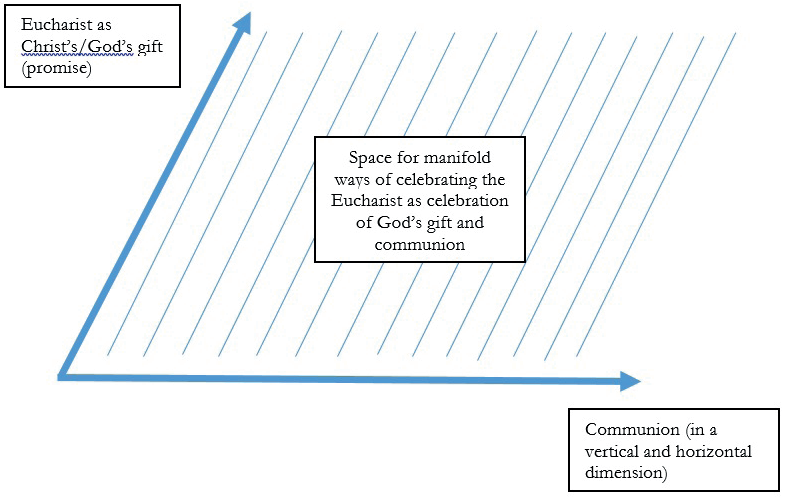
Community (Gemeinschaft) and Gift (Gabe) as the two Criteria for a Lutheran Understanding of Holy Communion/Eucharist

In the discussions I have had with a lot of people in the last weeks and months on online Eucharist services, I experienced that the question is relevant, if what they do online is 'really' Eucharist, is 'really' the sacrament – or is just some eating and drinking. Especially when it comes to Eucharist, the question of *certainty* is there. Do we just eat and drink together – or is it *really* Christ's gift we receive? Especially if I am at home, take the everyday bread I have and drink from the bottle of wine I opened yesterday, the question of authenticity and certainty is relevant – and this is a striking analogy to the questions which struck Luther in the 1520s connecting questions of pastoral care with theological questions.

Are there theological criteria which help us to discern if different practices are practices of the Eucharist or not? In my view, we should not define strict borders but offer orientation. My suggestion would be to define two axes, which open up a space for many different forms and practices – but also a space that questions some forms and might help us to say that they are 'outside'.

The two axes I suggest are: (1) the Eucharist as Christ's/God's gift; (2) simultaneous communion in a vertical (with Jesus Christ) and horizontal (with the other congregants) dimension. In the space opened by these two axes, a lot seems possible, but e.g., the self-service online Eucharist would be out of the field – as well as the way of 'distributing holy material' to individual congregants.

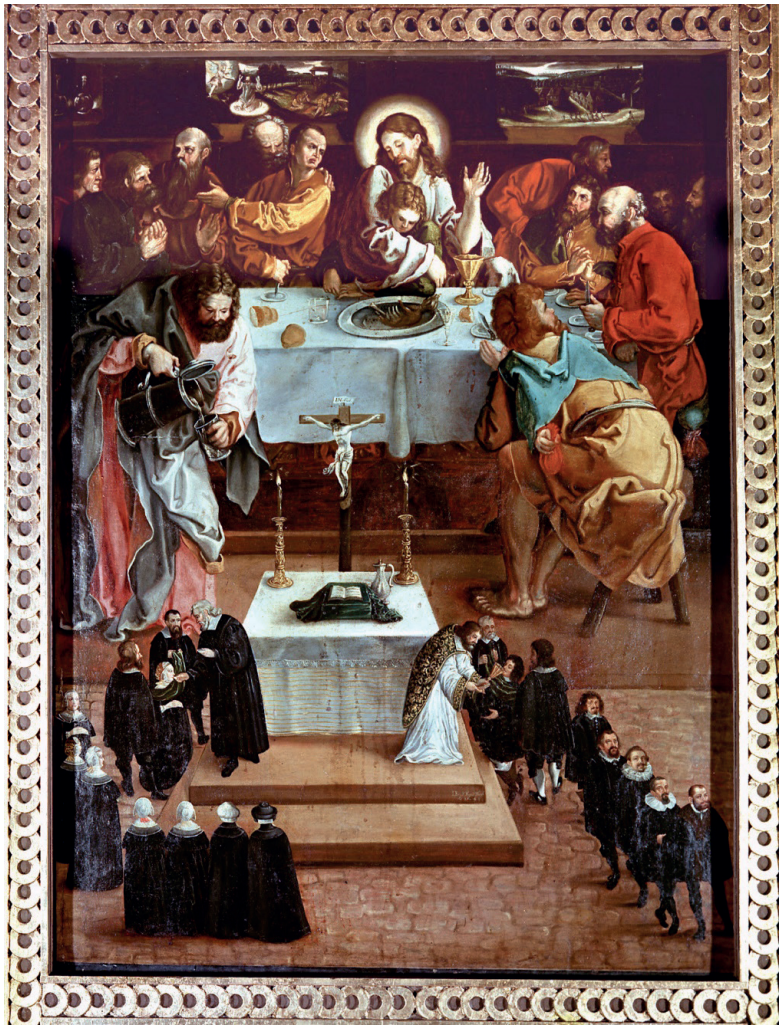
36. Formula of Concord – Solida Declaratio
VII.73 (Vom heiligen Abendmahl). My own translation in English: "[…] that not the word or work of any man produces the true presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Supper, whether it be the merit or recitation of the minister, or the eating and drinking or faith of the communicants; but all this should be ascribed alone to the power of Almighty God and the word, institution, and ordination of our Lord Jesus Christ.



5. It always changes – and remains the same …

Instead of summarizing the theses of this article, I want to offer a possibility of reflecting the plurality of different forms of Eucharist through the centuries. The altar of the Lutheran Church in Olbernhau, Saxony, shows a painting which belongs to a type called "Konfessionsbilder", works of art demonstrating the specificity of Protestantism by usually showing the Holy Communion. These paintings give us an exciting insight into sacramental practices in 16th and 17th centuries. The Olbernhau painting of 1648 combines the 'scene of institution' with the practice in the current congregation. Both differ a lot: a shared meal of Jesus and his disciples on the top of the painting and a highly symbolic ritual meal shown below.[37]

37. The following picture is from Kristian Hahn (Olbernhau) – and I thank him for his permission to print it here. Cf. also Helmut Schatz, *Historische Bilder zum evangelisch-lutherischen Gottesdienst. Eine Dokumentation*, Ansbach: Helmut Schatz 2004, 76.



When Jesus commanded: "Do this in remembrance of me …", he started a history of the transformation of the Eucharist. There are many good descriptions of this story of permanent change. One of the best may be the book of German Church Historian Anselm Schubert *Gott essen* (Cf. Schubert 2018). He describes the developments of the Eucharist from a culinary perspective – showing, e.g., that in the first centuries, Eucharist could be celebrated with milk and honey, bread and fish, bread and water, etc.

We could say: The practice of the Eucharist constantly changes, but the Eucharist somehow remains the same. This could be read as a Eucharistic adaptation of Gilles Deleuzes' view on *Difference and Repetition*.[38] For Deleuze, it is precisely the ongoing difference that makes the repetition of the 'same' possible. In this line, new forms of celebration could be cherished, but should, of course, be reflected theologically. We will never have the 'real' form of celebration – at least until we celebrate in whole and no longer mediated presence at God's table.

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38. Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton, New York: Columbia University Press 1994.

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