

Celebrating the Last Supper Online: A (Swiss) Reformed Perspective

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Abstract: Can the Last Supper be celebrated online? In German-speaking Reformed Switzerland this question has not been debated widely or even controversially. There are several reasons to explain this – among others, the article suggests, the Reformed understanding of the Last Supper. So what are its liturgical and theological core characteristics? The article explores five central aspects: the Last Supper as an act of commemoration; of building and sustaining community; the importance of the Holy Spirit; the idea that the congregation should take an active role in the celebration; and the symbolic understanding of the elements of bread and wine. Can an online celebration give expression to these aspects and what are the consequences with regard to the way such a celebration is put into practice?

Key words: Reformed theology – Switzerland – Last Supper – digital religion – rituals – liturgy.

Introduction

When in early 2020 the lockdown due to Covid-19 forced churches into the digital realm, a considerable number of congregations in Switzerland ventured out to celebrate their worship services online, and – occasionally – also the Last Supper. Some congregations were streaming entire worship services, in more or less the same form they were usually celebrated. Others looked for decidedly different formats of a digital presence, formats which in their view would be more adaptable to this specific medium (see also Plüss 2021).

The results of the Contoc-Study (Churches in Times of Corona) for Switzerland have shown, that 13.62% of those who sent back the questionnaire did celebrate the Last Supper during the first months of the 2020 lockdown (Neuenschwander 2021, 10).¹ This seems to be a relatively low percentage. But in Reformed, German-speaking Swit-

1. In Switzerland, 743 persons answered the questionnaire (both from the Reformed and the Catholic Church). It focused on the early phase of the pandemic from Easter 2020 to Pentecost 2020. Reasons given for the reluctance to celebrate the Last Supper online are: to reenact commemoration – bodily, socially and mentally – would be difficult online. I will come back to that point later.

zerland the Last Supper is not celebrated very frequently – often only at high feasts, in some congregations once per month. Apart from Easter Sunday or Good Friday (sometimes Palm Sunday), which fell in the period examined by the study, there might not have been further occasions. As the Eucharist is not part of the liturgy of every Sunday, I suspect that many congregations decided against celebrating the Lord's Supper on more practical grounds. Those congregations who did celebrate it, chose various ways of organising it. Be it that the pastor would stand alone in the church and "perform" the respective rites and words, be it that a small group of people would be present in the church and partake in the meal with wine and bread already lying in front of them individually. Some pastors invited congregants at home to fetch wine and bread in order to participate in the ritual from home – a form that is not new as it is also practiced in worship services broadcast by the Swiss Radio and Television company SRF (Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen) for several years now. Last but not least, some congregations consciously decided for a *Abendmahls-Fasten*, i.e. they decided against celebrating the Last Supper, until it would become possible again in the presence of the congregation.

In Switzerland, there has hardly been any wider public debate whether, from a theological point of view, it would be legitimate to celebrate the Eucharist online or not. This stands in contrast to Germany, where almost immediately a lively debate unfolded, with academics as well as church leaders issuing recommendations. Up to date there is – if I am correct – no academic publication addressing the issues concerning a digital Eucharist from a Reformed perspective in Switzerland. The exception was an elaborate seminar paper by Claudia Daniel Siebenmann (2020), which was published online and which reverberated in a few articles in the press.

Neither have there been any official statements by church leaders or by the Evangelical Church of Switzerland. This is not surprising, since the *ius liturgicum* lies with the 26 cantonal churches or, more precisely, with the congregations themselves. The autonomy of these congregations is held high, as well as the liturgical competence of the pastors and the trust in their ability to deal with liturgical questions responsibly. Therefore, statements by the church leadership would at best be read with interest, but would not be considered as binding. The relative freedom and flexibility in questions of liturgy has a certain tradition in Switzerland. Many cherish this tradition, because it precisely allows for an adaptation of liturgical forms to special situations, such as the Corona-Pandemic. Some, however, lament the great diversity of forms resulting from this tradition, especially when it comes to the liturgy of the Last Supper.

All these factors might have contributed to the fact that the celebration of the Lord's Supper online has hardly been discussed controversially in Switzerland. While from a Roman-Catholic or even a Lutheran point of view, some theological core issues concerning the understanding of the Eucharist might be put forward in arguing against celebrating online, I suggest that a Reformed position would rather open up the possibility of doing so. In a short article in "Zeitzeichen. Evangelische Kommentare zu Religion und Gesellschaft" Horst Gorski also points to a difference between the Reformed and the Lutheran tradition in dealing with the questions pertaining to celebrating online, and links it to different understandings of the presence of Christ (*Realpräsenz*): "For some [the Reformed, K.K.], a digitally mediated celebration of the Eucharist, with participants in different locations can be compatible with the promised and believed presence of the risen Christ, because his presence is imagined spiritually. For others such an idea bears some difficulty, since the question of the bodily presence of Christ remains unclear" (Gorski 2020).² It must be noted, however, that some Lutheran theologians recently have argued in favour of the possibility to celebrate the Lord's Supper online (e.g. Winter 2021 and Schrodtt 2021).

Therefore, what are the theological and liturgical core characteristics of the Lord's Supper from a Reformed point of view? And can online celebrations give expression to these? Or does digitalization bear the danger of giving away what is essential to a Reformed understanding of the Eucharist? In order to probe deeper into these questions, I ventured out to explore some of the core characteristics of a Reformed theology of the Last Supper by going back to the Reformers: Huldrych Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger and Jean Calvin. The context which informs my reflections is the specific context of (German-speaking) Reformed Switzerland, which is not only shaped by the theologies of these founding figures (and other prominent theologians), but by many other parameters, such as the democratic, federal political system, which also influenced the organisational structures and the identity of the church. Of course, the liturgies of German-speaking churches in Switzerland have not entirely preserved the liturgies of the reformers, but have also undergone substantial changes

2. My translation. The original wording is: "Für die einen (die Reformierten, K.K.) lässt sich eine digital vermittelte Abendmahlsfeier von Teilnehmenden an unterschiedlichen Orten durchaus mit der verheissenen und geglaubten Gegenwart des Auferstandenen vereinbaren, weil die Gegenwart geistlich vorgestellt wird. Anderen bereitet eine solche Vorstellung Schwierigkeiten, weil die Frage nach der leiblichen Gegenwart Christi dabei unklar bleibt."

in the course of five hundred years, especially in the last century (see for example Kusmierz 2018 and Kusmierz and Marti 2017).

Whether the Lord's Supper can be truly and fully celebrated and experienced by a spatially separated community of course also depends on how it is put into practice. The digital liturgical setting asks for a specific liturgical design and awareness. So, if for example – as outlined in more detail below – *commemoration* is a central feature of a Reformed understanding of the Lord's Supper, what implications does this have for the actual liturgical setting? Of course these reflections must take into consideration the fact that it makes a difference whether we speak of a worship service that is streamed live including the celebration of the Lord's Supper, where the participants at home are invited to participate (in Christoph Schrodt's terms a "hybrid Eucharist" or "Hybrid-Abendmahl", Schrodt 2021, 498), whether the service is recorded in advance and streamed at the usual time for worship (Schrodt: an "online-Eucharist"), or whether we look at a celebration of the Lord's Supper via Zoom or other conference-tools (Schrodt: conference-Eucharist).

A Reformed perspective on the Last Supper: some insights for the debate

1: The Last Supper as an act of commemoration: restaging and reliving the "original" scene.

Carrie Euler (2013) offers a concise description of Zwingli's view on the Last Supper as an act of commemoration, a view passionately shared by Johannes Oekolampadius (Wendebourg 2009, 101–138). Euler writes: "Also behind Zwingli's conception of the Supper was his emphasis on the communal and commemorative function of the sacraments. The word 'commemoration' (*commemoratio*) appears over and over again in his writings on the sacrament, because for Zwingli, the sacrament was a re-enactment of a historical event, Christ's final supper with his disciples" (Euler 2013, 62). The congregation is reminded of God's devotion and God's grace towards humankind in Jesus Christ; it is reminded of Christ's suffering, his death and his resurrection. The sacrament, in this sense, serves to make something *visible* and *tangible*. In celebrating the Last Supper, the congregation gets deeply immersed into the original scene of Jesus' meal on the eve

of his death, into the drama that unfolds and that marks the beginning of something new (Jenny 1968, 48 and 51).

In order for the congregation to be able to do so, Zwingli stages the drama, the scene, in his version of the liturgy for the Last Supper “Action oder Bruch des Nachtmals/ Gedechtnus/ oder Dancksagung Christi” (Zurich 1525).³ It is “a re-enactment of the Last Supper, not Christ’s death on the cross” (Euler 2013, 63). The table where the Supper is celebrated is placed before the choir in the church, within the space of the congregation (Ehrensperger 2003a, 17; Jenny 1968, 49). There are wooden vessels, unleavened bread. Bread and wine are taken to the congregation by deacons, and they pass “the bread and cup amongst themselves” (Euler 2013, 63). Bearing in mind that in the middle ages, the Eucharist used to be staged far from the congregation and was celebrated to a greater part without the congregation, this is quite revolutionary.

The point of this dramatic staging of the Last Supper is, that by immersing itself into the narrative of Jesus sharing this last meal with his disciples, the congregation becomes part of the scene. Vice versa, the original historic scene is turned into something the congregants share in in the present, so that the ancient narrative comes to life today. Commemoration is a basic element of religious practices such as worship in general and the Eucharist in particular.⁴ Thus, it does not just mean to call something in mind and let it fade back into the past. Rather, the act of commemoration brings to life something that happened in the past and thereby unlocks its relevance for the present. It means that in this very moment something happens to the congregation and with the congregation. In the case of the Lord’s Supper, this not only involves mind or soul, but becomes an embodied experience by eating bread and drinking wine. This is a notion of commemoration that can be linked back to the ritual of Passover itself, where the liberation from slavery in Egypt is re-enacted and lived-through year after year.

If for Zwingli commemoration is a main feature of the Last Supper and if he intended the congregants to unlock its meaning by offering them signs and elements within the liturgy that would facilitate such an appropriation, we might ask whether such an immersion into the original scene is possible in a digital setting. Or does it seem to constitute a “performative contradiction” as David Plüss asks (Plüss 2021, 202–203)? How can I become part of the “drama” of the story, sitting on my own in my living room? If I am lacking the bodily

3. Also Jenny 1968, 48.

4. For a more detailed discussion see for example Ehrensperger 2003b and, with special emphasis on the Last Supper, Ehrensperger 2003c.

experience of sharing a room with others, or of hearing the voices of others while singing the hymns? How can I experience the communion with others, especially if we cannot share in the act of breaking the bread together?

Commemoration is ignited by several elements in the celebration: there is, on the one hand, the narrative that brings the story to life, condensed in the words of institution (or “Abendmahlsbericht” as it is called in the latest version of the liturgy for the Reformed churches in German-speaking Switzerland).⁵ Added to that are visual and haptic signs: the elements on the table, the sound of the breaking of the bread, the feeling of the bread in one’s hands and mouth, the taste of the wine or juice, the coolness of the metal chalice or the rough surface of the clay cup, the proximity of the congregation assembled around or before the table. While narrative and visual elements can more easily be transmitted digitally, the digital experience of the Lord’s Supper certainly lacks an important dimension, which would enable the immersion in the drama, namely that of being close to other bodies and of resonating – positively and negatively – with those bodies. There is no scent reminding me where I am, I only see the part of the room, which the camera shows (but maybe I see even more – the organ player’s hands, the painting at the ceiling, etc.).

This does not mean, that an online celebration is deprived of the bodily dimension at all, which seems so important to Zwingli. While sitting on my own in my apartment, celebrating the Last Supper online, I still am mind *and* body (Deeg 2021, 141). I see things, I feel, I taste something. A central element for strengthening this bodily dimension while celebrating online would be that congregants actually have a piece of bread and a glass of wine or juice in front of them. Drinking and eating, as very tangible actions involving various other senses, help participants to embody the narrative and meaning of the Supper – of being nursed and strengthened by it, in body, mind and soul.

Even if the aspect of commemoration is hampered by the lack of a shared bodily experience and by the separation of the communicants, it is possible online. There is nothing that fundamentally stands against it, albeit it makes the online celebration a different experience. Whether participating at home is possible depends, however, on a careful liturgical design, which pays attention to the way the

5. “Abendmahlsbericht” could be roughly translated as “account of the Last Supper”; the liturgical commission wanted to stress the fact that there is no effect connected with these words, but that it is only an account, calling in mind what happened the night before Jesus died, see: Liturgie- und Gesangbuchkonferenz der evangelisch-reformierten Kirchen der deutschsprachigen Schweiz 2011.

“story” is communicated and mediated. An online celebration probably needs some more narrative elements, which paint the picture of the scene and invite congregants with words to become part of the story.⁶ In any case, it would demand a raised sensibility of those, who are responsible for the liturgical design of the Last Supper, to the special characteristics and logics of online communication, be it in a streamed worship service or in a Zoom-version of it (Deeg 2020, 434).

Of course, the ability to get immersed into an online celebration of the Last Supper, also strongly depends on those who participate – on their current mood and motivation and on their willingness to engage in the drama and narrative of the liturgy. As a participant, I might also be distracted, I might become impatient and switch the computer off. It might feel awkward to celebrate on a sofa, or with my family members watching closely. There is no room and special atmosphere that helps me to join the celebration.

To enable people to become part of the story is, of course, already a challenging enough goal in an *analogue* celebration of the Last Supper and much more difficult to “achieve” *online*. I will come back to this point below, because it is strongly linked to a second characteristic of Zwingli’s conception of the Supper.

2: By celebrating the Last Supper, the congregation is moulded into the body of Christ

Both Zwingli and Bullinger stressed the fact that by celebrating the Eucharist, the congregants grow together as a community. Thereby they are shaped or moulded into the body of Christ. The community of believers turns into the body of Christ, not the bread. The participants are – so to say – tightened to the body of Christ through the ritual, they are reassured that they form part of this one body. Markus Jenny writes: “Crucial is not the transformation of bread and wine into body and blood of Christ before the communion, but the transformation of the congregation into the body of Christ, which should find its expression in a shared act of breaking the bread within this community” (Jenny 1968, 60).⁷

6. In the sense of Martin Nicol and Alexander Deeg, who describe the task of the preacher as to “put one another in the picture” (“Einander ins Bild setzen”) with words, see Nicol and Deeg 2005.

7. My translation. The original wording is: “Das Entscheidende ist aber nicht die Wandlung von Brot und Wein in Leib und Blut Christi vor der Kommunion, sondern die Wandlung der Gemeinde zum Leib Christi, was während der Kom-

If forming and building a community is so crucial to the celebration of the Last Supper, then of course, it is necessary to ask whether and how this can be experienced online. How can people sitting in front of their computer screens come together to form a community? In the German-speaking protestant debate on digital forms of the Eucharist, some have questioned whether community can be truly experienced in these formats because they lack the element of the physical co-presence of the congregation. Subsequently they argue for abstaining from celebrating the Eucharist online (most pointedly Kristian Fechtner – Fechtner 2020).

The digital realm has certainly challenged our understanding of what constitutes a community quite profoundly. For younger generations it is probably rather self-evident that community can be experienced in social media or in the world wide web. This kind of community is not based on face to face encounters, but on communication in words and images. It is, of course, mediated communication where self-expression must not cohere completely with the person behind it. Online communities might be tainted with the uncertainty of not knowing whether the person I am connected with is the person she or he pretends to be. On the other hand, digital modes of communication enable their users to stay in close contact with others, even across larger distances, thus strengthening togetherness.

Theological and liturgical concepts of community often work with quite idealised notions of what a community should be. In worship, a community is formed – a community that should exceed the worshipping community and form the congregation as a whole. But even in worship, the way community is experienced and lived out can be very diverse. Worship might indeed harbour the possibility of nurturing relatively close relationships, where people support each other and share life. But community in worship can also be quite transient and temporary, rather symbolically expressed by singing, by praying together in one voice or by celebrating the Eucharist, while congregants are not necessarily getting into closer contact. For some, the proximity of sharing bread and wine in a half-circle, visible for all others present, does not feel comfortable at all. Worshippers also consciously choose the degree of proximity they want to allow. All these various modes of participation are legitimate. Even if liturgies are celebrated in co-presence, the sense of community can be severely hampered by subtle or even more obvious modes of exclusion, be it that I do not know the hymns that are sung or the codes that are used, be it that I

munion im gemeinsamen Handeln des Brotbrechens innerhalb dieser Gemeinde Ausdruck finden soll.” See also Ehrensperger 2003a, 28 and Schweizer [1954], 104.

feel excluded by a certain kind of language (see also Springhart 2021, 132–133; Schrodt 2021, 508).

The community that is built in digital celebrations of the Lord's Supper might just be taken as another variant of togetherness that is indeed markedly different to a physical co-presence (Wabel 2021, 11; Deeg 2021, 138), but is neither more nor less wanting than other forms of community. Online liturgies might even be perceived more intense, or even more personal, e.g. in the case of Zoom-liturgies (Schrodt 2021, 510). Schrodt points to Teresa Berger's notion of a "perceived co-presence", which defines online community more than "physical co-location" (Schrodt 2021, 59).⁸ Or as Roman Winter puts it: "Even in a real-space encounter community does not depend on a mere co-presence, but on certain experiences" (Winter 2021, 251).⁹

This kind of community is not bound to a concrete physical room, but nevertheless shares a common space, which is not defined by walls, but constituted by acts of communication, time, relationships, or specific signs. This specific understanding of space – put forward by the proponents of the so called spatial turn – might help to probe more deeply into the characteristics of a digitally mediated space.

Thus, our notion of space can and must be expanded. In the context of digital religious lifeworlds and practices such as the Eucharist or the Last Supper the notion of shared time probably becomes more relevant. If participants online are not able to physically share a *room*, it might be important for them to share *time* when celebrating the Last Supper. Digital media open up the possibilities of celebrating simultaneously (hybrid or online worship in the terminology of Schrodt), but also the possibility of re-viewing a worship service that has been streamed, but is still available online. Viewers could of course also decide to participate in the recorded version of the Lord's Supper. This might not only feel a bit awkward, but probably hampers the experience of community. As we have seen above, the notion of community, of the congregation being moulded into the body of Christ, was very important to the Reformed reformers. Celebrating simultaneously enhances the sense of community, a community which harbours the presence of Christ. It is more apt to give expression to the original intentions of Zwingli and the other reformers. Of course this does not exclude the possibility that someone celebrating by him- or herself could nevertheless be drawn into the narrative of the Lord's Supper and be strengthened and comforted in doing so.

8. For the whole argument see Berger 2018.

9. My translation. The original wording is: "Der Gemeinschaftscharakter hängt auch bei einer real-räumlichen Begegnung nicht an der blossen Kopräsenz, sondern an bestimmten Erfahrungen."

It does also not exclude the possibility of Christ revealing himself in this situation, since his presence in the spirit is not limited to the ritual or to worship in general.

Again, fostering community and participation is also part of the task of those who lead the liturgy and depends on the respective liturgical design. They must, for example, be willing to communicate and to connect with those “behind” the camera, and involve them by directly inviting them to take part. They must find liturgical forms that open up the possibility of a digitally mediated participation. This can be achieved, for example, by the way everything is put into scene, and by small visual signs. In a worship service celebrated on Easter Sunday 2020 a small (Covid-19-conform) group of people is standing in a wide half-circle behind the pastor while he is leading through the liturgy of the Last Supper. The participants at home, by virtue of their position in front of the screen, visually form part of that circle, completing it.¹⁰ In another celebration of the Last Supper on Easter Sunday six persons who participate in the performance of the liturgy (pastor, lector, warden...) form a circle, each has a plate with a piece of bread and a small cup of wine standing before him or her on the floor. There are six additional plates in the circle symbolically marking a space the members of the congregation, sitting at home, could occupy.¹¹

Even if those responsible for an online liturgy can prepare the ground for a rich experience of the Lord’s Supper, not everything lies in their hands. But this leads to another characteristic of a Reformed understanding of the Last Supper: the working of the Holy Spirit.

3: The Holy Spirit: Source and ferment.

It was Heinrich Bullinger who took up a thought that already Zwingli – in his later years – had begun to consider: The latter, Zwingli, had conceded some form of *spiritual* presence of Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist through the Spirit (Euler 2013, 64). Bullinger put even more emphasis on the workings of the Holy Spirit and, in doing so, managed to address two issues: the question of the form of presence of Christ on the one hand and the question of how the congregation would be constituted as the body of Christ on the other hand. Strengthening the role of the Spirit helped him to find an agreement with Calvin in the *Consensus Tigurinus* of 1549. Still, not bound to

10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qakq5Zj0Jg>, minute: 51:54. Accessed January 6, 2022.

11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lxk WCnoWc&t=2854s>, minute 44:00. Accessed January 6, 2022.

the elements of bread and wine, but effective in the whole process and in the interplay between all elements and acts important to the Supper. In addition, the people participating in the communion are connected, strengthened and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit they are in communion with the risen Christ, writes the German Theologian Michael Welker and continues to describe the Holy Spirit as a *source* and *ferment*, endowing community between human beings and God, and among themselves. It is the Holy Spirit that assembles the Church in the Last Supper (Welker 2012, 170). He or she assembles the congregation present on-site, but puts the congregation into the wider context of the church worldwide, transcending time and space. The congregation present never celebrates on its own, but is always connected to the wider Christian community, by singing old hymns for example, by praying the “Our Father” and by sitting at the common table, with Christ being the host. The motive of the Holy Spirit transcending time and space, weaving together people and places that are kept apart – for example by a pandemic – and leading them into the presence of Christ is indeed not a new idea. It could be strengthened in the context of online liturgies, through epiclesis, prayers, etc., thus invoking a community that anyway exceeds the local congregation by far.

A fourth element of a Reformed perspective on the Last supper needs to be mentioned:

4: The Last Supper as a collective act of the congregation.

Zwingli’s liturgy for the Last Supper stands out in another perspective: the whole congregation should actively be involved in celebrating the liturgy. The liturgy was not the responsibility of the Pastor alone. Zwingli intended different parts of the liturgy to be read by men and women respectively (Credo und Ps 113), and he placed the words of institution into the hands – or better the mouth – of a deacon (Ehrensperger 2003a, 21, 25). I have already mentioned that bread and wine were carried right into the congregation. The ritual of the Lord’s Supper is an act *of* the congregation, not something that is performed “on” the congregation by the minister or pastor (Jenny 1968, 50).

Thus the liturgy is – to a certain extent – detached from the function of the minister or pastor. He/she should be the guardian (Wächter) of the liturgy. But the effect and outcome of the liturgy does not depend on him or later her, or on their ministry. Raymond Mentzer writes: “The Reformed liturgy for the Supper effectively dissolved the traditional barrier between clergy and laity. It witnessed,

[...] the emergence of a ‘non-clerical’ Christianity. The cup or even its administration was no longer the exclusive privilege of the priest or ordained pastor” (Mentzner 2013, 248).

Christ is present in the celebration, but not represented by the priest. It is the former, who is the host of the community assembled at the table. This might be read as an echo of Zwingli’s intention to strongly root the liturgy in the narrative of the Last Supper. This relativizes the role of the pastor. It also accounts for a reluctance to blend the role of the pastor with the figure of Jesus while staging the “drama” (see also Jenny 1968, 61).

With this participative approach, Zwingli was ahead of his time and at the same time ahead of our time. In spite of his intentions, the pastoral role is still quite dominant, even if many church constitutions explicitly mention the possibility that others should and can be involved in the liturgy. Responsorial readings, for example, have hardly been put into practice and are still a quite alien element in the Swiss German-speaking context.

From a Reformed perspective the above could pave the way to acknowledge the position and role of those who celebrate at home as participants who are actively taking responsibility for the liturgy. This special situation could then be seen as one that offers the opportunity of fostering the liturgical maturity of the believers. The situation at home demands a considerable amount of motivation, dedication and liturgical competence since the person must decide upon and create his or her liturgical setting: Where am I sitting? What cup do I take, which bread? Do I light a candle? How do I create an environment that fosters a suitable atmosphere? Are the children allowed to play while the celebration is going on? There is no room, atmosphere or environment that helps him or her into the liturgy. The room of the church is certainly important in helping people to focus, to concentrate, and to get into a specific mood.

One could, of course, ask whether this demands too much of the individual believer. Maybe. The ability of the individual congregant to delve into the liturgy does highly depend on the degree of his or her previous familiarity with celebrating the liturgy on-site. In case there is some bodily memory of the liturgy and this memory can be activated or triggered, the online experience is likely to be more intense. In this sense, the analogue and the digital worlds are closely intertwined and the digitally mediated celebration depends on the analogue model (see Wabel 2021, 111).

A last but, of course, not less important point arising from my fragmentary probing into some Reformed characteristics of the Lords

Supper and their possible implications for celebrating the Eucharist online, is the question of how the elements are understood:

5: The elements: “earthly and visible things to represent and set before our eyes the deep mysteries of God”.¹²

For Zwingli, Bullinger, Oekolampadius and Calvin it was unthinkable that bread and wine should turn into the flesh and blood of Christ. “This is my body” meant to them “this *signifies* my body”. Consequently, this led to a figurative understanding of the elements as symbols and signs – or seals in the words used in the *consensus tigurinus* (Euler 2013, 67ff).

Nevertheless, as Carrie Euler points out, Zwingli and his followers did not believe “the Supper to be an ‘empty’ ritual, devoid of emotions or spiritual impact” (Euler 2013, 58), even if they “interpreted the words ‘this is my body’ figuratively ... and denied all possibility of a corporeal presence in the bread and the wine.” They also denied that the participation in the Lord’s Supper would ignite faith or convey grace (Euler 2013, 60; Ehrensperger 2003a, 17), but later on Zwingli and even more so Bullinger conceded that believers would be strengthened in their faith by partaking in the process of breaking and sharing the bread through the workings of the Holy Spirit. The later Zwingli was even “inclined towards accepting Christ’s spiritual presence in the bread and wine” (Euler 2013, 63). According to Bullinger bread and wine – although not being able to convey grace – could, as symbols of grace, strengthen faith (Euler 2013, 64). And of course this had implications for his understanding of what a sacrament is. Later in his life he defined a sacrament as “a sign of a holy or sacred thing, a visible form of invisible grace, and a public testimony” (Euler 2013, 64).

The symbolic meaning of the Eucharist detaches or at least loosens the connection between the elements and the salutary properties or effects of the celebration as a whole, assigning the latter more to the combination of the different liturgical acts and words. All that matters, happens in the process of celebrating together and does not depend on the elements alone. Schrodt argues that also from a Lutheran point of view, the presence of Christ can be understood not only to be bound to the elements, but to the combination of all parts and acts pertaining to the Last Supper (Schrodt 2021, 502).¹³

12. Heinrich Bullinger, quoted in Euler 2013, 71.

13. See also Deeg 2021, 137–8.

The interpretation of bread and wine being “mere symbols” that are not assigned any special properties by themselves, of course makes it easier to allow for people celebrating at home by providing themselves with a piece of bread and a glass of wine or juice when celebrating the Last Supper online.

In the Lutheran context, one argument against celebrating online is that the bread must be given to the congregants as an external gift and that they themselves must receive it, according to Mk 14.22 and parallels.¹⁴ This is a question, which is secondary to Calvin and which he once answered quite nonchalantly: “Whether or not the believers take it [the bread, K.K.] in their hands, or divide it among themselves [...] whether they hand the cup back to the deacon or give it to the next person [...] – it makes no difference” (from the Institutes of Christian Religion 1536, quoted in Mentzer 2013: 232).

Still, since the symbolic understanding of the elements is so important, there might be a price to pay. Normally – for the sake of the coherence of the symbol – it does make sense that it is one bread and one cup (or rather, one bottle) which is shared in the celebration of the Last Supper. It visualizes the body of Christ consisting of all believers, in the same way the bread is made from different grains. This is one reason why many congregations in Switzerland make use of a whole loaf of bread. If there are many breads or several cups, the symbolic correlation between the bread and the congregation that is joined in the body of Christ is loosened, but only the symbolic coherence. For the essence, Calvin reminds us, it makes no difference. Circumstances can make it necessary to use several loafs of bread, or pre-cut pieces, or multiple cups, be it that the congregation is simply too numerous, or be it that rules of hygiene have become more important or even mandatory, as was the case in recent times. In that case several pieces of bread, or loafs are representative for the idea that bread in general is constituted of single grains.

14. See Winter 2021, 246–251 und Schrodt 2021, 504–506 for the more detailed argument. Both, however, argue that in order to experience the Eucharist as an external gift (“Gabe”) it is not necessary to actually receive it from someone else. Christ is not bound to the actual bread on the altar but conveyed symbolically in bread and wine through the Holy Spirit. Everything else would come close to a magical understanding of bread and wine. (Winter 2021, 247). The bread in general, but not the loaf of bread itself gives expression to the notion, that we receive it as a gift (Schrodt 2021, 118): “Wie schon schöpfungstheologisch das eigene Leben der Kinder [...] als Gabe empfangen werden [...] so kann analog die Abendmahlsgabe als *extern* empfangen werden, obwohl sie selbst bereitgestellt wurde.”

A worst-case-scenario? A preliminary conclusion

In his seminal book on the Lord's Supper (originally published in 1999), Michael Welker critically engages with the fact that some congregations are way too considerate when it comes to dealing with their members' restraints concerning hygiene, fears of infection or sense of shame, when having to eat and drink in front of other communicants. The result is a kind of worst-case-scenario, which he describes and which has – at least in a certain sense – become a reality in the corona situation. He writes that being too considerate of all these things could “dissolve the celebration of the meal into unworthiness up to a stage of perversion. ... A total liberation from all fears of contamination and of all problems regarding communication would, in the end, lead to a form of self-service with bread sealed in plastic and wine in front of the screen showing a video of a Eucharist. But if that were the case, it would not be a celebration of the Last Supper” (Welker ⁴2012, 85).¹⁵ Although Welker considers it important to address the restraints mentioned above, he also pleads for a dignified form that remains true to the purpose and intentions of the Eucharist. He is certainly right to caution against an unmindful or careless handling of long-lived and time-tested liturgical traditions and forms. Therefore, my starting point, too, was to ask, whether and in what form online celebrations can give expression to some of the theological and liturgical core characteristics of the Last Supper in a Reformed perspective.

Nevertheless, it has also been my intention to carefully explore the possibilities of celebrating online, since the digital realm becomes more and more part of our reality, also of the reality of the churches. It is a territory they must inhabit, too, since it has become a land that is inhabited (albeit virtually) by human beings and forms part of their reality. Or in the words of Ralph Kunz: to look for forms of celebrating and worshipping for today means to bridge the concerns of the reformers and – taking measure at love – the needs of contemporary men and women (Kunz 2006, 212). What helps people to master the pandemic, lockdowns, fear and loneliness? Does not the ritual of the Last Supper have the potential to provide some of the things that might be needed in view of the pandemic: a sense of community that

15. My translation. The original wording is: “Aber auch eine Inflation sensibler Rücksichtnahmen kann die Mahlfeier bis zur Perversion ins Unwürdige auflösen. [...] Eine vollkommene Befreiung von Ansteckungsängsten und Kommunikationsproblemen böte am Ende die Selbstbedienung mit plastikversiegeltem Brot und Wein vor dem Bildschirm mit Abendmahls-gottesdienst-Video! Nur würde hier nicht mehr das Abendmahl Christi gefeiert.”

spans across physical social distancing and renews strength in faith in order to be able to deal with life's hardship, even if celebrated online? These pastoral considerations seem important to me, too, and need to be balanced against "ritualistic correctness" (Welker ⁴2012, 85).

Keeping liturgies alive always means to balance the endeavour to exercise care with regard to their origins on the one hand, with the aim of making it relevant and accessible for people living in a specific time and context, of inculturating it, on the other hand. One challenge for the churches of today is to find ways of co-inhabiting the digital universe and to search for appropriate forms of doing so. For theology it offers the chance of rethinking and refining some core themes, as is the case in the debate on celebrating the Eucharist or the Last Supper online. As I have ventured out to show, Reformed theology of the Last Supper does open up possibilities for the transition into the digital realm. There is, in a Reformed perspective, probably no essential theological impediment to celebrating online (as the Roman-Catholic understanding of the elements might be). The issues that must be discussed evolve around the liturgical design or form and the question how the characteristic features of the Last Supper can be transported or mediated, "how *communio* can be experienced and how *participatio* can be enabled" (Deeg 2021, 140).¹⁶ Certainly, the online version has to grapple with some serious restraints compared to analogue celebrations. The latter are so rich in textual, sensual and bodily experiences that they probably represent the more ideal form. Analogue celebrations form the deep ground online celebrations are anchored in. Still, I do not think online liturgies to be an absolute worst-case-scenario, but just a new reality we face and need to explore. It is important and extremely fruitful to ponder and discuss these questions in an ecumenical conversation, such as the colloquy, which gave rise to some of the articles in this issue.

The debate on the possibilities of celebrating online points to some issues that definitely deserve more scholarly attention. Many of these issues I have touched upon in this article. They are, of course, already discussed vividly. There is, for example, the role of bodily experiences in liturgy and the question of how we theorize the body in relation to online liturgies. Especially in the Reformed context we have only recently come about to pay more attention to the liturgy as not only involving mind and soul, but the body as a whole and we should not easily forgo the insights gained. The debate on online liturgies will also focus our attention on the role of space and how people experi-

16. My translation. The original wording is: "[...] wie *communio* zu erleben und *participatio* zu gestalten ist".

ence space, especially shared spaces in the digital realm, and thus also community. By comparison, it might also generate new insights into the specific quality of the room that a church-building provides for the liturgy. Interesting is also the issue of how digital and analogue experiences of rituals and liturgies are interrelated and whether the digital experience depends on the analogue. To explore all this, more empirical research needs to be done on the recipients' side. How do people who partake in online liturgies experience participation, community, liturgy? And with regard to those who are responsible for the execution and performance of liturgies: what are the practical implications for shaping online-liturgies, which allow for an intense and deep experience of the Last Supper? Online liturgies need to pay special attention to the conditions of digital communication and the liturgical design must take this into account.

Time will tell how the digital adventures of churches and congregations unfold in the future. An observation made by David Plüss, might prove true: He observes that – already in the earlier stages of the pandemic – online formats are to a greater extent homiletic or word-based formats: short sermons, podcast formats, discussions, blogs and vlogs, because – among other reasons – these are easier to implement (Plüss 2021, 210–211; see also Deeg 2020, 428–429). Rituals are indeed more complex to celebrate online, and especially with regard to the Last Supper congregations might gladly (and with some relief?) revert to the analogue ideal. Or maybe they are tempted to explore hybrid or digital forms more extensively? As I said: time will tell.

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