

CLB Theological Council communion practice advisement during non-corporate worship

April 1, 2020 (April 4, 2020 update)

Dear CLB Ministers of the Gospel & CLB congregations,

I greet and write you on behalf of the CLB Theological Council. Yesterday, our CLB Theological Council met for the afternoon and evening. Among our agenda items, we discussed the celebration of the Lord's Supper in this season of government mandated social isolation for the protection of ourselves and our communities, the admirable adjustments and energies of many of our congregations to post worship services and other ministries of the Word online for the benefit of parishioners, and also the desire to offer communion to believers who are not able to be physically present in worship.

As the coronavirus is spreading across our country we are witnessing the number of persons testing positive rising every day along with the rising number of deaths. We are experiencing a new way of living as governmental orders are mandating the closing of schools, nonessential businesses and gatherings including churches. Social distancing, shelter at home and restrictions on gatherings are the new norm. All this is for our good and the good of our neighbor. Therefore, we encourage total compliance with these orders knowing that the government is instituted by God for our good. We pray for all that are in authority that we may "live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness." (1 Timothy 2:2)

Under normal circumstances we are given the gift of gathering to hear the word, receive the Lord's Supper, and in fellowship encourage one another. Given this new situation all this has changed. While we recognize that the Scriptures has not given us laws for Sunday worship nor established the frequency of the Lord's Supper, it does encourage us to not neglect the assembling of ourselves together. However, even under normal circumstances, there are times when it is advisable for us to abstain from gathering together.

For the good and protection of all, we are not given the opportunity to gather as persons to hear the word and encourage one another. We are grateful that we are still able to read the word and hear it proclaimed. We are not given the opportunity to gather to participate in the Lord's Supper where we hear words of institution and are given the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through His Supper our Lord gives assurance as is fitting to the sacrament. Since the Lord's Supper is not the only means of grace, we can be assured that the Gospel we are given through the written words of Holy Scripture and that is spoken to us, is delivering to us the fullness of Jesus Christ, his person and work. The Gospel declaring the forgiveness of sins is still being proclaimed and heard. We are being given all that Jesus is and has done for us. We hold this word precious as we receive it believingly knowing that we are being given all that it promises. Promises that will sustain us during these very difficult and trying times. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ for his life creating and life sustaining gifts in the Gospel.

The Theological Council advises the temporary discontinuation of the ministry of the Lord's Supper during the time congregations are unable to gather in person for worship where the ministry of the Word and consecrated elements and their distribution are kept together and delivered to those gathered in communion.

Stewarding the Lord's Supper:

We understand from the New Testament that it is given to the church to be stewards of God's mysteries which include the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. (1 Corinthians 4:1)

We understand from the New Testament that the church entrusts the stewarding and oversight of God's mysteries to the pastor and elders. (Acts 14:23, 20:28; Titus 1:4; 1 Corinthians 11:23)

We understand from the New Testament that the pastors and elders as shepherds and overseers of God's flock (1 Peter 5:1-3) and stewards of God's mysteries, are to exercise such shepherding faithful to Scripture and by seeking to assure that "all things are to be done decently and in good order". (1 Corinthians 14:40)

In seeking to be faithful stewards of the Lord's Supper we turn to the Scriptures and ask, what can we learn from the institution of the Lord's Supper passages in the New Testament about what is fitting or appropriate for the stewardship of the Lord's Supper?

The passages are Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:18-20; & 1 Corinthians 11:23-25.

From our study of these passages:

We understand from the New Testament what we are given to do (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). We see that the words of institution were spoken in the presence of a specifically located bread and fruit of the vine thus addressing this specific bread and this specific fruit of the vine which are consecrated as the true body and blood of our Lord. As gathered persons in the hearing and seeing presence of these words of institution and this specifically located consecrated bread and fruit of the vine, there is certainty that what they are being given is indeed ("this is") the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. The "*is ness*" is sure and certain. We do not believe that online (virtual) communion is able to be faithful to the "*is ness*" institution of the Lord's Supper.

We understand from the New Testament that the eating and drinking was in the corporate (body) gathering (which is also true of private communion, even though the body is smaller) of those who see and hear the words of institution addressing the specific and present bread and fruit of the vine, and are what is then given as the body and blood of Lord Jesus Christ to these specific gathered persons. The "*what ness*" of the gift is sure.

We understand from the New Testament that the Lord's Supper is a corporate meal. There is a physically gathered corporate (body) reality to the Lord's Supper, a horizontal dimension, as well as the vertical dimension. There is a coming together as church the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:17-34). It may be asked, "How is online communion different from private communion?" Private communion is done in-person with the words of institution addressing the physically present bread and this specific fruit of the vine in the hearing of the participants (communicants) who then receive the consecrated Lord's body and blood. There is certainty that the communicants are being given and are receiving the specific bread and specific fruit of the vine addressed in the words of institution and therefore the Lord's true body and blood. There is certainty of what is being given to them. We do not believe that this would be true for online communion. We have no doubt of God's ability to work or create beyond what He has revealed in the Word to us; however, we have not the certainty of revelation that the specific elements that the officiant would be addressing as the body and blood of Christ are the elements that the participant would be given and receiving.

We understand from the New Testament that there is a Pastor/Elder presence of stewarding and oversight of the Supper of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 4:2; Titus 1:5-9)

We hear in the Lord's words, "do this" (Luke 22:19), an essential wise and necessary keeping together of Christ's words of institution, spoken by the present shepherd, before the present elements, to the present gathered communing church.

It is on the basis of this understanding of the New Testament's teaching regarding the Lord's Supper and the stewarding of this precious gift of our Lord that the Theological Council advises the temporary discontinuation of the ministry of the Lord's Supper during the time congregations are unable to gather in person for worship where the ministry of the Word and consecrated elements and their distribution are kept together and delivered to those gathered in communion.

We recognize this is a hardship but are thankful that even in this time we still have the fullness of Christ given to us by way of the Gospel word. We also encourage refraining from other means of delivering the Lord's Supper. In the meantime, we live by way of the Gospel word, ask God for patience and prayerfully wait for the day with anticipation when we can once again gather as God's people.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rev. Paul M. Larson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rev. Paul M. Larson, President
Church of the Lutheran Brethren