

Can the Eucharist be Celebrated in an Online Gathering? A Theological Analysis

Stephen R. Holmes

Revd Dr Stephen Holmes is a Baptist minister who presently serves as senior lecturer in theology at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.

sh80@st-andrews.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4222-8209>

Abstract

Can an online celebration of the Eucharist through means of video-conferencing software be permitted? The Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 made the question urgent for many churches; for persecuted or geographically scattered churches it is perennial. This article offers definitions to clarify the question asked, and then two arguments, one based on an extension of currently accepted practices, and one based on the ecumenical doctrine outlined in the Lima text, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, to propose an affirmative answer to the question.

Keywords

Online church; Eucharist; virtual church

Introduction and Previous Studies

Discussions of dispersed church worship are not new,¹ arguably going back to the early days of radio broadcasting,² but they are inevitably evolving as technology evolves,³ and they attained a particular urgency in the early months of 2020 with worldwide lockdowns preventing

¹ Inevitably, the field has moved since 2012, but Heidi Campbell's 'Introduction: The Rise of the Study of Digital Religion', in *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, ed. by Heidi A. Campbell (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1–23, remains a very helpful introduction.

² Indeed, we might trace them back to reports of St Clare's miraculous remote observation of the Christmas mass during her last illness in 1252, which led Pope Pius XII to declare her the patron of television.

³ A radio broadcast is unidirectional and aural only; St Clare's vision was both aural and visual, but remained unidirectional; contemporary video-conferencing solutions allow for real-time interaction and are visual and aural; they do not (as many churches rapidly discovered in moving online during lockdowns in the 2020 pandemic crisis) allow for multi-voiced participation in liturgical response or congregational singing, because of differing and discernible time-lags for each participant — but it is not hard to imagine that such functionality might come in the next few years. A few years after that — some possibility of tactile engagement, perhaps?

churches from meeting.⁴ One question that came to rapid prominence at that time, driven perhaps by the fact that in many western nations lockdowns began just before Easter (in the western calendar), concerned the possibility of online eucharistic celebration.⁵ This article is a theological analysis of this possibility, arguing that ecclesiology, rather than sacramental theology, should be the determining factor in the answer given, but also suggesting that Calvin's theology of eucharistic presence is particularly accepting of the possibility of an online Eucharist.

I write, of course, from a specific perspective. I am a Baptist — ordained, indeed, although my paid employment almost throughout my working life has been in secular universities. I am British, and so I know well the UK responses to Covid,⁶ and the limitations placed by the British lockdowns; I cannot pretend to have studied the details of restrictions on worship in every other context. That said, theological principles are not subject to local legal variations; and in what follows I am seeking to be expansive, indicating the limits of various arguments, and constructing a broad space bounded by certain identified lines (which of course may exclude certain readers, or indeed traditions).

The question of celebrating the Eucharist online is also not a new one. I believe that the earliest published academic treatment of it was by Debbie Herring in 2008,⁷ but even then she had many earlier experiments to reflect on (she suggests that the first attempt to celebrate a digitally-mediated eucharist was led by Stephen C. Rose over Ecunet

⁴ This essay has its deep roots in two blog posts I wrote about that time: 'Can We Celebrate an Online Eucharist? A Baptist Response 1: a Positive Argument' <<http://steverholmes.org.uk/blog/?p=7716>> [Accessed 11 October 2023] and 'Can We Celebrate an Online Eucharist? A Baptist Response 2: Some Possible Objections' <<http://steverholmes.org.uk/blog/?p=7721>> [accessed 11 October 2023].

⁵ The debate as I followed it happened in Facebook feeds and Twitter interactions, but Pete Phillips captured the more interesting and lengthy contributions in his 'Bread and Wine Online? Resources and Liturgies for Online Communion' <<https://medium.com/@pmphillips/bread-and-wine-online-resources-and-liturgies-for-online-communion-34b80972a068>> [accessed 12 December 2022]. A useful ethnography of Canadian practices of online Eucharists during the period has also been published: Sarah Kathleen Johnson, 'Online Communion, Christian Community, and Receptive Ecumenism: A Holy Week Ethnography During COVID-19', *Studia Liturgica* 50, no. 2 (2020), 188–210.

⁶ Public health is a devolved matter in the UK, so each of the four nations had its own response.

⁷ Debbie Herring, 'Towards Sacrament in Cyberspace', *Epworth Review*, 35 (2008), 35–47.

in the summer of 1997, although she concedes that it was problematic in a number of ways⁸). In 2009 Paul Fiddes wrote a short paper about the possibility of virtual sacraments within the constructed world of Second Life, which has since been published in various places online.⁹ There have been various other contributions since, although not very many, as, so far, most academic study of digital religion has been social-scientific rather than theological, and so devoted to analysing what is going on, rather than discussing what should be going on.¹⁰

Two ecclesial Canadian contributions are something of an exception, and deserve notice.¹¹ The Presbyterian Church in Canada received an overture in 2010, asking whether eucharistic elements could be ‘blessed via webcam or other video media’.¹² A committee duly reported to the 2012 Assembly, recommending that online consecration should be accepted, with the following provisions: that (i) all those participating should have ‘pre-established face to face relationships’; (ii)

⁸ Herring, ‘Towards Sacrament’, p. 36.

⁹ Paul Fiddes, ‘Sacraments in a Virtual World’ <<https://www.frsimon.uk/paul-fiddes-sacraments-in-a-virtual-world/>> [accessed 7 May 2020]. Fiddes has recently revisited the question, with responses to some of the criticisms of his earlier piece: Paul S. Fiddes, ‘Sacraments in a Virtual World: A Baptist Approach’, in *Baptist Sacramentalism 3*, ed. by Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020), pp. 81–100.

¹⁰ There is one significant post-pandemic contribution: Richard A. Burridge, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times: Celebrating the Eucharist in the Everyday and Online Worlds* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022). Burridge is particularly concerned with debates within the Church of England; he is, for example, unaware of the Canadian discussions I reference in the next paragraphs, although he devotes a number of pages to tracing the positions of other churches in England and the USA (pp. 13–46). Burridge offers a series of ‘proposals’, most of which are accounts of what to do on the assumption that an online celebration is impossible. His positive position is not dissimilar to what I develop below, but perhaps less attentive to ecumenical eucharistic theology. He assumes a disjunction between a ‘Zwinglian’ memorialist position and a more ‘Catholic’ position, which may adequately describe the debate as it stands in the Church of England, but is simply inadequate ecumenically.

¹¹ This is perhaps not a surprise as Canada contains vast, sparsely populated areas, which pose a huge challenge to practices of gathering. Anecdotally, I recall a conversation some years ago in Halifax, Nova Scotia: I was talking to a regional Baptist leader, who was reflecting that in much of his area (the Atlantic provinces) there might be a hundred people (not congregants) in a given fifty-mile radius, and was seeking help in imagining what practices of church might be sustainable in such a context.

¹² Committee on Church Doctrine Recommendation No. 2, ‘Providing Communion Using Technology’, Presbyterian Church in Canada, 2012 <<https://presbyterian.ca/resources/resource-finder/download-info/providing-communion-using-technology/>> [accessed 16 November 2020] (p. 1).

that an ordained elder¹³ and some other members of the congregation are locally present together wherever the elements are to be received; and (iii) that the media being used are adequate in various ways to make the shared service meaningful.¹⁴ This recommendation was adopted at the 2012 Assembly.

This is a significant decision, and its bases are worthy of reflection. It is justified, essentially, on two grounds: that receiving the Eucharist is a central element of Christian life, and should be facilitated wherever possible;¹⁵ and that the essentially communal aspect of the Eucharist could indeed be mediated via electronic media, within certain, fairly stringent, conditions and safeguards. In terms of the British debate around Easter 2020, the first point was uncontroversial; the second essentially irrelevant, in that there was no possibility for the gathering of an elder and several members of the congregation that the report required. That said, this is the first ecclesial document of which I am aware that accepts the possibility of the consecration of eucharistic elements via video link, and so it is significant; the limitations placed are about establishing right relations within the fellowship who receive communion; the possibility of consecration is simply asserted.¹⁶

The United Church of Canada decided in 2015 that ‘online communion was permissible’, and repeated this statement in the face of lockdowns in 2020.¹⁷ The earlier statement followed an extensive

¹³ In common with other Presbyterian churches, an elder in the PCC is elected by the congregation to a role involving shared leadership responsibilities on the Presbytery and pastoral care of the congregation. They will also typically share in the administration of the Eucharist, but are not permitted to celebrate the sacrament.

¹⁴ Committee on Church Doctrine, ‘Providing Communion’, pp. 5–6.

¹⁵ This (surely correct) instinct is central to Burrige’s disquiet with the formal decisions of the Church of England during the pandemic lockdowns.

¹⁶ The theological rationale offered is disappointingly thin. On the one hand, there is an insistence that the strictures of the Westminster Confession about private masses do not obtain, which is hard to argue with, but not nearly enough to establish the point; on the other, there is an assertion that through technology ‘human presence can be extended’, which is certainly true, but surely demands theological reflection on different modes of human presence (‘Providing Communion’, p. 4). I will argue below that there are several good reasons (within certain important limitations) to argue that eucharistic consecration can be effective over, for example, a video link, but this point does need to be established, not merely assumed.

¹⁷ The 2020 statement can be found on the Church of Canada website <https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/online_communion_in_united_church.pdf>; the 2015 rationale does not appear to be available online.

consultation in 2013, with many contributions arguing various perspectives.¹⁸ Contributors reflected on Wesleyan ecclesiology, ecumenical implications, practical considerations, and more. It would be impossible to do justice to the richness and variety of what was then offered in less than a full paper, but two points are worth noticing. The first is the clear implication that changing technological possibilities do change the right judgement here. Consider the following argument:

We should see this reality by facing one another. In both the Old and New Testaments, facing is crucial (cf. Gen. 32; 2 Cor. 3:18–4:6). *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (THM) emphasizes the importance of the people facing the presider and the presider facing the people (THM 29), so that we see one another. In on-line Communion, that seeing would seem to be uni-directional: the presider would be seen by the other celebrants, but she would not see them, nor would they see one another. Since on-line Communion does not allow communal co-seeing, a common facing, it masks rather than reveals how ‘we all with unveiled faces are being transformed from glory to glory’ (2 Cor. 3). On-line Communion is not a manifestation of ‘the visible unity of the church’ (THM p. 37).¹⁹

The authors of this paragraph have other reasons for rejecting online Communion, to do with ‘bodily’ presence, but in this argument the key point is seeing faces (something I shall argue below does resonate with significant Biblical themes): technologically, it was not possible in 2013; it is generally possible now. Theological necessities do not change, clearly, but the ability of technology to supply those necessities can change, and our theological reflections must reflect that reality.

Second, there is an evident tension in the various contributions between (what is perceived as) effective mission and (what is perceived as) good order. There are those insisting that online sacraments are working, in that they bring people into a living relationship with Christ and the church, and so they can only be good, and others insisting that they are improper and so can only be bad. This tension is hardly a new one, particularly within the Wesleyan heritage these papers appeal to —

¹⁸ The 2013 papers can be found in the following directory: <<http://www.umcmedia.org/umcorg/2013/communion/>> [accessed 11 October 2023]. I am very grateful to the Revd Daniel Hayward for providing me with this link.

¹⁹ Brent Latham, Gil Hanke, and Larry Hollon, ‘Online Communion: Community and Culture’ <<http://www.umcmedia.org/umcorg/2013/communion/response-papers-composite.pdf>> [accessed 11 October 2023] (pp.1–2).

John Wesley himself felt it over field preaching, after all — but it raises a genuine issue: taking both claims at face value, if missional effectiveness and ecclesiological impropriety clash, which should take precedent?

Theologically, of course, we will want to refuse the question: that which is ecclesially improper cannot be truly missionally effective, and *vice-versa*. This only raises further questions, however: if there is an apparent clash, is it because the seeming missional success is in fact an illusion, or because the claimed ecclesial impropriety is not in fact a problem? In the context of a pandemic, one distinction that seems relevant here is that between the *esse* and the *bene esse* of the church. To put the point bluntly, in my ecclesial tradition it is possible to celebrate the Eucharist using chipped china on an upturned hay bale — we have considered the *esse* of the sacrament to be fairly broadly extensible. Were the sanctuary and the communion plate — the *bene esse* — available, of course, we would not think of using the barn, but our history across the world is often a history of persecution, and the *bene esse* has often been unavailable to us. I assume that all will agree that online Communion is sub-optimal; the *bene esse* would be to celebrate together in the sanctuary; the question of whether online Communion violates the *esse* of the sacrament, and so of the church, is the decisive one.

Definitions and Distinctions

Clarity about terminology is important here. Much online discussion when the question became urgent in 2020 used the language of ‘physical gathering’ versus ‘virtual gathering’, but this is actively misleading for at least two reasons: first, in the field of digital religion (and social-scientific studies of online activity generally), ‘virtual’ has a particular meaning, referring to avatar-based interactions in a digitally-constructed world (Second Life, Minecraft, Roblox, etc.), which is just not what was being talked about when online Eucharists were being discussed; second, the flow of photons through fibre-optic cables, electrons through wires, and electromagnetic waves through Wi-Fi networks, is all irreducibly physical, and so online engagement is physical engagement also, just mediated in some significant ways. We need to work harder to

adequately describe the difference between a local and an online celebration of the Eucharist.

John Dyer has proposed a helpful typology of ways of doing church over the internet.²⁰ ‘Broadcast’ church is a unidirectional delivery of a church service (live or recorded). Radio services are broadcast, as are YouTube services. ‘Virtual’ church is, as suggested above, a church service conducted by avatars in a virtual environment. ‘Online’ church is characterised by two-way, real-time interaction by people using video-conferencing software. These are not exclusive: in particular, online services might well use broadcast elements — a pre-recorded sermon, for example — or a particular community might have some elements of its internet meeting online and other elements broadcast.²¹ Accepting Dyer’s distinctions, I will immediately bracket virtual church; what was being discussed in April 2020 was local churches moving to a broadcast or online or blended broadcast-and-online model, not moving into virtual worlds. (For those interested in communion in a virtual church, Fiddes’ papers cited above make the right distinctions and arguments.)

We should also distinguish between different modes of separation. Broadcast church raises the possibility of temporal separation: I may watch the YouTube video of the service at a different time to another worshipper. Temporal separation raises obvious questions for eucharistic celebration: it further strains the notion of ‘gathering’ at play; and, if the key act of consecration is the celebrant’s reciting of certain words (whether the dominical words of institution or the epiclesis [invocation] or both), then the fact (or possibility) that the celebrant’s words are not contemporaneous with the act of Communion of each worshipper might well be perceived as theologically difficult.

Spatial separation needs careful thought. It is of a course an inevitable fact of human life: my occupation of a particular spatial

²⁰ John Dyer, ‘What is an (online, virtual, broadcast, local) Church? Some Helpful Distinctions’ <<https://j.hn/what-is-an-online-virtual-broadcast-local-church-some-helpful-distinctions/>> [accessed 7 May 2020].

²¹ During the 2020 UK lockdown I engaged with one local church who broadcast their Sunday morning services, but made their Sunday evening services online through a well-controlled Zoom meeting; and with another who broadcast all Sunday worship, but had prayer meetings and home groups online, and online social gatherings after their broadcast Sunday worship.

location renders it impossible for any other human being (indeed, material object) to occupy that same location — if an infinite number of angels may dance on the head of a pin, that simply highlights the irreducible difference between human and angelic existence. There is a sense, then, that the congregants in the sanctuary are spatially separated. I suppose that most of us will intuitively feel that the spatial separation of an online congregation is of a different kind, but we do need to specify this difference in kind in ways that both respect the facts of the situation, and are theologically robust.

I have already indicated my unhappiness with a distinction between physical and virtual; I am similarly unhappy with narrating the issue using a distinction between ‘mediated’ and ‘immediate’ interaction or gathering, for three reasons. First, some form of technological mediation has been so normal as to be routine in church services for some while now; I do not remember the last time I went to preach — or celebrate the Eucharist — in a church and was not expected to use a microphone and PA system, for example. Second, even if not using a microphone, when the celebrant speaks, they create sound waves which travel through the air to the ears of their congregants, which suggests that physical mediation is an inevitable component of all human interaction. We are thus going to need some other distinction to capture the (obvious and real) difference between congregating in the sanctuary and congregating online. Third, if we believe that the Eucharist mediates divine grace, then insisting that it must be celebrated in an unmediated way seems a rather odd thing to do, and in need of extensive defence. The celebration of an online Eucharist is physically mediated; what it is not is somatic — marked by bodily presence.²² I propose, then, that the right distinction is that between somatic presence and somatic separation. When the heart of the rite is eating and drinking, this is a significant distinction, of course.²³

²² This distinction assumes, of course, the non-extensibility of the human body. This, I suggest, is presently a plausible assumption, although it might be complicated by future technological developments; the sound of my voice and the sight of my body can presently be extended by technological means, but my bodily presence is stubbornly confined to the space within my skin.

²³ At this point, accounts of transubstantiation might seem significant, but in fact they are not. The question here is whether the bodily/somatic presence of the celebrant with the communicants (and the elements) is necessary for a valid celebration, which does not depend in

In making the necessary distinctions, we should also distinguish between different models of online eucharistic celebration. Those in non-sacerdotal traditions might, on the basis of Acts 2:46, imagine every household celebrating their own Eucharist, perhaps under the direction of the church leadership; contemporaneous household Eucharists is therefore one model. In April 2020, the Church of England (amongst other denominations) advised ‘spiritual communion’, where congregants watch the celebrant receive the Eucharist and recall Christ’s death, thus receiving the benefits of the Eucharist without receiving the elements; this is a second model.²⁴ Finally, we might imagine a single eucharistic celebration in which the participants congregate online — a true ‘online Eucharist’. This last is the possibility I am exploring in this article, as it would seem to be both the most interesting, and least theologically problematic, way of celebrating the Eucharist via the internet.

A Continuum of Modes of Presence

I suggested above that the meaningful distinction between a traditional Eucharist and any sort of online Eucharist was that between somatic/bodily presence and somatic/bodily separation. Somatic separation, however, is not uniform, particularly given the possibilities opened up in recent decades by technology. The separation experienced by the family of an undercover agent operating behind enemy lines in wartime is rather different from the separation experienced by my family when I am away at an academic conference, and able to be in touch through social media and video-conferencing as often as my schedule allows. We might explore this through some reflection on an exegetical ambiguity in Paul.

The canonical Pauline letter corpus is of course itself a witness to the pain and limitations of somatically separated Christian fellowship, as well as a leveraging of the then-available technology to try to

any way on accounts of the substantial presence of the body and blood on the altar. Indeed, in as much as accounts of transubstantiation (or indeed consubstantiation) demand the possibility of some sort of extended bodily presence, they perhaps offer some level of *prima facie* support to the possibility of mediated consecration.

²⁴ Burrige discusses this model at length in *Holy Communion in Contagious Times*, pp. 67–83.

overcome that. Paul offers us the distinction I have already proposed, between somatic presence and somatic separation, in 1 Corinthians 5:3: ἀπὼν τῷ σώματι, παρὼν δὲ τῷ πνεύματι ('absent in body [σῶμα], present in spirit [πνεῦμα]'). This is straightforward.

In an earlier letter, however, Paul phrases the distinction in another way, practically identical for him, but inviting further reflection from us. In something of an echo of the Corinthian text, he comments to the Thessalonians ἀπορφανισθέντες ἀφ' ὑμῶν [...] προσώπῳ οὐ καρδίᾳ, περισσοτέρως ἐσπουδάσαμεν τὸ πρόσωπον ὑμῶν ἰδεῖν [...] (1 Thess 2:17, 'separated from you — in person, not in heart — we longed [...] to see you face to face' NRSV). I have included the Greek here to highlight the point that the same Greek word — πρόσωπον — is translated in two different ways in the NRSV in this verse: 'person' and 'face'.

This is certainly not wrong; the semantic range of the word stretches at least that wide in Paul's day, and continues to be capacious through most of the patristic period.²⁵ For Paul, of course, and indeed anyone living prior to the most recent decades, there is little practical difference given the expressed desire: Phoebe could not have seen Paul's face unless he was personally (and somatically) present to her; for us this is no longer true.

²⁵ In earliest extant usage (Homer), πρόσωπον referred fairly simply to the face; from there, it came to be the term for the mask an actor in a Greek drama would wear, from which sense another meaning of 'character' (in a play), and so 'actor in a narrative' and so 'person' gradually developed. In the theological tradition the word is demonstrably fluid in meaning through the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Diodore of Tarsus (4th century) used it to mean something like 'an existing subject of predication and experience', and so 'person' with some weight; for Theodore of Mopsuestia (4th–5th century) and Nestorius, the word carried no ontological weight, and so the sense of 'mask' or 'outward appearance' was to the fore (famously Nestorius proposed a 'prosopal union' of divine and human in the incarnation, and meant a shared appearance with no shared ontological entanglement). John Philoponus and Leontius of Jerusalem again use the term in different senses; only in John of Damascus's *Philosophical Chapters* do we get a stable definition (ch. 43), which John achieves largely by insisting that appearance reflects reality, and so that the 'mask/face' sense and the 'person/character' sense cohere.

The desire to see ‘face to face’ can be satisfied in online church;²⁶ the desire to be personally, which theologically must imply somatically,²⁷ present cannot. Paul longed to be with the Thessalonians ‘prosopally’; did that mean just seeing their faces, or bodily presence, or what? As I have indicated, these are not distinctions he (or any generation prior to our own, really) could have made; in the absence of video-conferencing solutions, bodily presence was necessary to seeing faces. That said, almost everything Paul talks about longing for in 1 Thessalonians is achievable in online meeting: he wants to pastor them, to observe and interrogate their growth in faith, to be able to correct error, to offer exhortation and encouragement. All of this is possible online. As the letter closes, however, we find the instruction to ‘greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss’ (5:26) — there comes a point where bodies are indispensable.

If Paul could have met with the Thessalonians over Teams or Zoom, he would have jumped at the chance, I am sure; he could have heard of the answers to his constant prayers, and offered the encouragement and advice he longed to give — but he would still have wanted to kiss them.

No-one who engaged with church through the 2020 lockdown needs to be told that our online gatherings were sub-optimal; kissing may not be quite our culture, but hugging might be, sharing the peace in ways that involve bodily contact probably is, and communal singing almost certainly is. But these reflections on Paul’s expressed desires do remind us that gathering online was not nothing: we could ‘meet face to face’ in online church; we could hear of each other’s faith; and offer encouragement and counsel; we could bring encouragement, and offer

²⁶ Having been involved in making both online church and higher education work as well as each one could through the 2020 lockdown, I am very aware of those who are excluded from the possibilities of video conferencing through poverty, technological inexperience, or the geographical limitations of internet availability. We need a serious ethic of online church alongside the theology before we can imagine a worthwhile practice. That said, my focus in this paper is on the theology.

²⁷ The arguments are of course well-rehearsed, but, in the most concentrated form, the credal assertion of bodily resurrection necessitates that any theology of human personhood must insist that to be properly human is to be embodied.

prayer. In online church we are not simply apart, although we are scattered.

These reflections suggest that we should imagine ‘presence’ to be a continuum, not a binary. If somatic presence is one end of the continuum, and simple absence the other, in between there are many intermediary points: full visibility, without bodily contact; synchronous verbal conversation with no visible presence (e.g. a phone call); synchronous written conversation via text message; asynchronous conversation via voicemail or email or bulletin board; extended asynchronous conversation via the exchange of letters (what Paul knew) . . .

In considering the possibilities of a valid online eucharistic celebration, these distinctions might become important — we might find that we need to insist on synchronous presence, or on some real visual engagement (‘seeing face-to-face’ in Paul’s terms, which was the thrust of the UCC argument I quoted in the first section above), or on some other condition, as the necessary minimum. Recognising that ‘presence’ is a continuum, not a binary, opens the space to make these distinctions and to have these discussions.

An Argument from Current Practice

My first argument for the possibility of an online Communion is to suggest that all the accommodations necessary for it to be valid have already been routinely made in at least some traditions of the church.²⁸ We have already moved along the continuum of presence described above in common and uncontroversial practices. That is, communicants

²⁸ I am not concerned here to explore precisely which denominations have made these accommodations, but I will indicate the theological ‘red lines’ that exclude my proposal as they become relevant. Where I make claims about common practice, I rely merely on personal experience; that said, I have worshipped over the years in many dozens of local churches on several different continents, and, in part through involvement in formal denominational and ecumenical structures both nationally and internationally, can claim some more general awareness of what is common and what is exceptional in at least several traditions of the church. On this basis, I would be surprised if anything I suggest here is found controversial; even if it is not acceptable in a particular reader’s own tradition, that reader will have to own that in other traditions such practices are indeed common.

regularly view the celebration only on a screen, possibly whilst in a different room, and then receive elements that the celebrant has not touched in consecrating them. Given this, it is difficult to see why a true online Eucharist as defined above is impossible.

I have made two claims about current practice in this summary: let me defend them, and address a third issue.

First, the ‘screening’ of the celebrant: can a Communion actually be celebrated with the celebrant on a screen? That is, is the ‘prosopal presence’ of seeing the celebrant face to face, adequate, or is somatic presence necessary? The implicit answer in the routine practice of many local churches would appear to suggest that screened presence is enough, as they already rely on it. Routinely, during a Communion service, there might be video links to the creche, or to an overflow hall — in my own church, where we meet (appropriately, for a eucharistic celebration) in an upstairs room on a Sunday, we screen the service to a ground floor room for those unable to manage the stairs. Clearly this is not the same as us all being in our living rooms at home, but it is not immediately clear how it is qualitatively different (I will consider this argument more fully below). The Holy Spirit is at work when the Eucharist is celebrated, and the Holy Spirit is not limited by location or distance. (It is possible that an account of the sanctity of the church building could be theologically interesting here, with the creche/overflow room rendered acceptable by being in the same building as the sanctuary, a point I also address below.) Many churches are demonstrably happy, given their recent practice, that ‘screened’ participation in a service is adequate for receiving Communion as part of that service.

Second, untouched elements: many of us, I suppose, will have communicated in large gatherings where, for reasons of logistics, the elements are spread around the meeting space as the consecration is performed. We receive elements that were several metres distant from the celebrant when consecrated.²⁹ Or in another context, a celebrant might elevate and break a wafer/piece of bread, and then place it with

²⁹ Burrige, *Holy Communion in Contagious Times*, p. 334, suggests that such a practice has become routine in English (Anglican) cathedrals.

many other wafers/pieces of bread on one of several plates, to be served to the communicants by someone other than the celebrant. There has been some measure of physical proximity, to be sure, but I have already suggested that proximity is not an interesting theological category: a communion wafer untouched by the celebrant that is a few centimetres from one they have touched, or that is on a different table in the same room, is not obviously more — or less — available to consecration than one on a kitchen table across town.

Third, we speak of ‘being one body’, because we ‘share in one loaf,’ and ‘one cup’ (echoing Paul in 1 Corinthians); if we all have our own elements to receive at home, in what sense are we being faithful to this Scripture, and to our repetition of it in our liturgy? We have to be honest here: it would be fairly hard to find a church that shares in both ‘one loaf’ and ‘one cup’ in its typical Eucharist. My own Free Church tradition moved to individual cups as the norm a century or more ago, whilst retaining a single loaf;³⁰ more Catholic traditions might insist on a shared cup (but it is not always single), but have, similarly since the late nineteenth-century, defaulted to individual wafers rather than sharing a common loaf. The ‘one loaf/one cup’ language is, then, stretched fairly seriously by almost all currently common practices of eucharistic celebration. What is different in theological terms between such a context and the idea of the celebrant consecrating elements that are scattered across the town (say)? Either there is some need for the celebrant (or an altar?) to touch each portion of the elements, or the work is the Holy Spirit’s, and is therefore necessarily in no way spatially confined.

On these bases, I suggest that *if the way we have been accustomed to celebrating the Eucharist in recent years is acceptable, then an online Eucharist is also acceptable*. I have indicated the doctrinal red lines that would allow a tradition to resist this conclusion, but I am fairly confident that no significant western Protestant tradition, at least, can claim to have held

³⁰ More recently we have often surrendered the single loaf to accommodate people with coeliac disease, providing a second, gluten free loaf that, for obvious reasons, is kept physically separate from the loaf that is elevated and broken by the celebrant.

to these red lines. What arguments might there be against this? Three suggest themselves.

The obvious first argument is that one or another common accommodation is in fact illegitimate; this would indeed be fatal to the argument I have sketched in this section (I venture a more positive, and so less vulnerable, argument in the next section). I simply observe, however, that the practices I have just described have been common enough to be routine in many very visible contexts, and have gone unchallenged. I myself have received the sacrament under every condition described above, and have celebrated under most of them. No-one was hiding what they were doing; if one condition or another rendered a sacramental celebration invalid, the point ought to have been raised and the argument had before now. The fact that celebrations with each accommodation have routinely been held without challenge suggests fairly strongly that (on these grounds) there is no theological challenge to an online Eucharist, only an emotional disquiet at its novelty.

A second argument might turn on the combination of several accommodations: we might argue, for example, that it is acceptable for the celebrant to be only visible on the screen, and that it is acceptable for them to not touch the distributed elements, but that the combination of these two accommodations invalidates the sacrament. I am not, in principle, opposed to such an argument, but I struggle to see how it might be made with theological seriousness. Issues of sacramental validity appear to be binary (either the elements are consecrated, or they are not; it is not the case that they are 75 percent consecrated under this or that condition); the combination of binary factors will always be itself binary (if, and only if, all conditions are met, then sacramental validity is established); on this basis, the combination of accommodations is not relevant; if each accommodation is valid, regardless of how many there are, then the sacrament is validly consecrated.

A third argument might impose particular limits on some of the accommodations above. This is potentially stronger. Consider the criterion of touch, for example: there might well be a valid theological claim that the celebrant does not need to touch every individual piece of bread, but that it all needs to be served from the altar from which

they are celebrating, or needs to be present within the consecrated space in which the celebration is taking place. With an adequate doctrine of the sanctity of the altar, or of the consecrated space, this would certainly undermine the case I am making. My challenge to such an argument would be similar to that offered above concerning the potential illegitimacy of one or another accommodation: in various previous eucharistic celebrations (perhaps held in a tent at a festival, or outdoors) have such strictures in fact been insisted upon before now? If not, it is hard to see their invocation now as theologically serious.

A fourth argument would concede the points made above, but in a repentant mode. An objector might say, 'Yes, I see now that in allowing this or that accommodation we crossed a particular theological line; I did not see that at the time, and if I had, I would not have allowed it.' Such an argument might be personally significant for an individual, but my points above have relied on claims about practices that are routine in many local churches; unless and until a substantial number of those who have been willing to engage in these practices adopt this repentant attitude, then the change of heart of one, or a number of, individual(s) does not affect the arguments I have made. Were several denominations to insist formally that, for example, screening the celebration of the Eucharist to the creche should be a reason to refuse the sacrament to those in the creche, then my arguments would have failed on this ground; until such a situation obtains, they stand, regardless of the personal qualms of one or another objector.

A Positive Theological Case

I want in this section to make a positive case in the most general terms possible. That is, as far as I can, I will make no decisions between any of the currently controverted matters in eucharistic theology, but hover above them with some very general theological principles that all, or virtually all, will accept. To do this, I will draw fairly extensively on the relevant sections of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*;³¹ for reasons of space, I will not engage extensively with the reception history, but I am writing

³¹ Hereafter *BEM*. As is common, citations will be by paragraph within the relevant section, so 'E2' refers to numbered paragraph 2 under in the section on the Eucharist, and so on.

with full awareness of it.³² Where this is not possible, I will indicate what I see to be the limits of my case in footnotes.

My first principle is this: the triune God acts to make the sacrament efficacious (*BEM* E2). Different Christian communities will disagree on how this claim is to be developed (is the epiclesis necessary for the Spirit to be active? To what extent is the celebration dependent on the activity of an ordained priest, acting *in persona Christi?*...), but the basic claim will be general. The activity of the triune God in the world is not limited spatially (I assume this claim does not need defence, but it is the practical result of the standard Christian doctrine of divine omnipresence); therefore, if we wish to claim a spatial limitation on a triune work, we will have to offer defence as to why this particular action is unusual.

This already shifts the burden of proof significantly: phenomenologically, our usual experience of eucharistic celebration is spatial, and so we are inclined to assume that spatial limitation is normal; theologically considered, however, spatial limitation must be established, not assumed, as it is abnormal. Accounts considered above of the particular sanctity of the sanctuary, or of the need for somatic contact between the celebrant and the elements, are possible ways of establishing spatial limitation, and may, in certain theological traditions, succeed, but they can only be understood as positive arguments for an exception to a general principle.

Second, the Eucharist is tri-dimensional, although the balance between these three dimensions will be different in different traditions and accounts. It is first vertical, an act of thanksgiving ('eucharist'), and perhaps sacrifice,³³ offered to the Father (E3–4; see also E12 and commentary thereon). Second, it is horizontal, an act that deepens the communion of the faithful who communicate (E19–26). Third, it is internal, or perhaps individual, in the recollection (anamnesis) of the

³² See World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry 1982–1990*, Faith and Order Paper, 149 (Geneva: WCC, 1990), pp. 60–67 for a summary of the responses received, and *Churches Respond to BEM*, 6 vols, ed. by Max Thurien (Geneva: WCC, 1986–1988) for the texts of the responses.

³³ I have recently explored concepts of eucharistic sacrifice in Stephen R. Holmes, 'A Reformed Account of Eucharistic Sacrifice', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 24 (2022), 191–211.

death of Christ and the renewal of the truth of this in each communicant (E5–7; 12–13). Clearly, only the second of these might offer a reason for spatial limitation, in that the other two do not require any particular relationship with other communicants; that said, in Reformation traditions there has been a (proper, to my mind) insistence on the Eucharist as an act of the community.

BEM is interesting on this point: E1 already insists that the Eucharist is ‘the new paschal meal of the Church [...] [for] the continuing people of God’, suggesting an irreducibly communal dimension; however, the section of ‘The Communion of the Faithful’ (E19–21) is concerned with the whole church, and so does not focus on the local gathered community in any serious sense. That is, *BEM* already assumes that, whenever the Eucharist is celebrated, there is a translocal dimension that cannot be ignored (‘The sharing in one bread and in the common cup in a given place demonstrates and effects the oneness of the sharers with Christ and with their fellow sharers in all times and places.’ E19). This is not, of course, an acceptance of, or permission for, online celebration, a possibility that could hardly have been in the minds of the framers of *BEM* in 1982. It is, however, further indication that, in ecumenical tradition, the Eucharist has always been perceived as a sacrament that transcends spatial limitations in significant ways.³⁴

My purpose here, again, is to shift the burden of proof: in *BEM* two of the three dimensions of the Eucharist assume no spatial location, and the third focuses more on the transcending of spatial location than its maintenance. Just as when the Eucharist is considered as the work of God, when the Eucharist is considered in its sacramental effectiveness, it seems natural to assume that a dispersed/online Eucharist can be celebrated, unless and until we are given good reasons why it cannot.

For a third point, we might consider a basic orientation of sacramental theology, established most trenchantly by Augustine’s

³⁴ In the paper referenced in n. 29, I worked with Calvin’s account of the pneumatological relocation of the communicants, under which he suggests that those who receive the Eucharist are in/by the Spirit, made present with Christ where he now is in the heavenly realms. I also noted that this doctrine is asserted in at least some of the Reformed confessions (Holmes, ‘Reformed Account’, pp. 200–204). Such a doctrine further relativises the need for somatic presence, and so is particularly accepting of accounts of online eucharistic celebration.

discussions of baptism. Augustine is considering the question of the validity of schismatic or heretical baptism, and argues (against Cyprian, and so against the great weight of tradition in his context) that all baptisms performed in the triune name are valid. His argument is straightforward: the sacrament belongs to Christ, who intends it for good; a schismatic or heretic cannot either wrest the sacrament from Christ, or defeat Christ's purposes in the sacrament by their own intention to do something different; so, however deficient the performance of the sacrament, and whatever the erroneous intentions of the one baptising, and indeed the local community, Christ will do the good he intends through his sacrament.³⁵

This success of this argument is evident in history: only in a very few sectarian contexts (many, I must admit, developing within my own Baptist tradition) has there been a willingness to discount the validity of a baptism performed in another Christian tradition, whatever deficiencies might be ascribed to that tradition. The basic argument here is as Augustine stated: God intends to do good through the sacraments, and the various, inevitable, deficiencies of any particular sacramental service will not subvert the divine intention.

With regard to the Eucharist, the long-standing principle that the validity of the sacrament does not rely on the morality or indeed orthodoxy of the celebrating priest is a species of the same instinct: God desires to do good through the sacraments, and human failure will not limit that. This argument is however more complicated when applied to the Eucharist, for reasons that are historically understandable, but not, perhaps, theologically defensible. Two requirements stand out: the demand that the celebrant be episcopally ordained, and some sort of required belief concerning the sacrament, either that the elements are transubstantiated, or that there is some intention that the sacrament be sacrificial. Whilst there are some limited exceptions allowed by ecumenical arrangements when a believer cannot attend a church of their own tradition,³⁶ in general the sacrament of unity divides us still.

³⁵ On this see, for example, Adam D. Ployd, 'The Power of Baptism: Augustine's Pro-Nicene Response to the Donatists', *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 22 (2014), 519–540.

³⁶ For example, see the strictures and permissions of Canon 844 in the Roman Catholic Church.

That said, the question of an online Eucharist is not particularly affected by these debates. The basic scenario is a eucharistic community who cannot gather spatially, and so are seeking to gather online (as during the pandemic lockdowns). In this context, the basic doctrine, that the triune God's intentions to do good through the sacraments regardless of imperfect performance, can be invoked with confidence. If a particular tradition's doctrine insists on one of the limiting cases I have indicated — the sanctity of the sanctuary, or the celebrant physically touching every individual element — then this argument will not, of course, be relevant, but in the absence of such limiting factors, it seems significant. (It also gives us a way of narrating the *esse/bene esse* distinction made above: there is a proper requirement to celebrate the Eucharist in the most reverent way possible, and that includes physical gathering when it is possible, but when the best is not possible, the best we can do is adequate.)

Conclusion

I have argued that both current practice and ecumenical doctrine create space for the Eucharist to be celebrated online if that should prove necessary, and I have indicated where certain doctrinal commitments exclude that. I suggest that, for the majority of Protestant churches, at least, online celebration is a valid option. It should never be the preferred mode of celebration, but if, through reasons of distance (remembering my Canadian friends), public health (the Covid-19 lockdowns), or indeed persecution, somatic gathering is not possible, then an online celebration of the Eucharist can be a true Eucharist. In the midst of a pandemic, or under persecution, or simply scattered by geography, God's people should not be denied the good of the sacrament.³⁷

³⁷ I am very grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal who identified a weakness in the argument and pointed to two sources I had not been aware of. The piece is significantly better because of that reviewer's interventions.