

Can we take the Lord's Supper during lockdown?



Introduction

Since lockdown began and we could not hold regular church services, we have been doing most of our service virtually. We sing, pray, read the Scriptures, give tithes and offerings, hear God's word preached all while scattered in our homes and apartments across the city.

So, the question naturally arises - why can we not take communion in the same way?

Perhaps you have heard of churches that take communion at home, or simply wondered why we haven't so far?

Here is an answer.

The Scriptures

With any question, the first answer is not what feels right or what we perceive as appropriate, but what the Scriptures teach us. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is the longest treatment on what the Lord's Supper is and how to celebrate it in all the Scriptures.

A few points arise from a careful reading of 1 Corinthians 11.

First, Paul assumes that the Lord's Supper is celebrated "when we come together." This is repeated in v.17, 18, 20, 33, 34. Paul does not think the church takes communion whenever it feels like but only when it is gathered as a church.

Now, perhaps this is because Paul could not imagine a quarantine. Perhaps he is being descriptive, not prescriptive. However, in a different passage he ties the meaning of the Supper into the gathering of the church. In 1 Corinthians 10:17 he writes that "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." So even if we could all get the same kind of bread and wine in our homes, it would not follow Paul's instructions.

Additionally, part of the meaning of the Supper is that it is making the many of us into one body. If we are not together, how is that unity expressed? Paul says that we have homes for eating and drinking in (11:22) and such things should not be confused with the Lord's Supper.

The third reason for not celebrating the Lord's Supper is the seriousness with which Paul warns the Corinthians. He says that if we eat and drink without 'discerning the body' (eating it in ignorance or eating it while acting like non-Christians) we eat and drink judgement, even death on ourselves. Therefore, it is important that the Supper is explained and celebrated correctly. The way we take Paul's command seriously is to only celebrate the Lord's Supper led by qualified elders and pastors in a gathered setting.

There are other arguments to be made, but the clear intent of 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 is for the Lord's Supper to be eaten and drunk with the whole church together, overseen by qualified elders and pastors.

The Book of Church Order and the Westminster Confession of Faith

As we are part of the PCA, we have a book that governs our worship services. In short, good and godly leaders in the past have set down wise and biblical ways to organize a church. To be part of the PCA is to realize that the BCO (Book of Church Order) is not perfect, but a solid and reliable companion to Scripture that we voluntarily agree to abide by.

In our BCO (chapter 58) there are instructions for the Lord's supper and it follows closely to what 1 Corinthians teaches. In 58-1, we are to observe the Lord's Supper frequently. In 58-2, it warns the leaders of the church not to admit the ignorant or non-Christians to the Supper. In 58-4,5,6,7, it sets out guidelines for the minister to follow each time, which will be very familiar to people in our church.

In short, the BCO presumes a public, well-ordered, regular celebration of the Lord's Supper. It does not explicitly prohibit virtual communion, but such a celebration does not follow the spirit of our rules.

Additionally the Westminster Confession of Faith, in Chapter 29, interprets 1 Corinthians in the way outlined above, but adds this command in section 4 - that private masses, or receiving the Lord's Supper alone is forbidden. The reason is because receiving the Lord's Supper alone undermines the unity of the body of Christ, which is one of the main reasons for the supper. When the Confession was being written, the rich and powerful had personal priests who allowed them to skip regular services with all the lower class of people. But the authors of the Confession understood that such a practice undermined the meaning of the Supper and banned it from their churches.

Conclusion

All three of our sources of authority agree with one another: We should not celebrate the Lord's Supper except in the context of the physically gathered church, overseen by ordained ministers.

The lockdown makes this impossible and therefore makes it a time of fasting from this means of grace, which is frankly, a real bummer. We long for the day to celebrate this spiritual meal anew. But that will have to wait.

In the meantime, let's be gracious to churches and Christians that see things differently. There are churches that love Jesus, love the Bible and celebrate communion virtually. God still loves them and we do too. We can't follow them down that path, but we are glad they exist.

We'll see you on the other side.

Some useful links:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/baptism-lord-supper-online/>

<https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/article/lockdown-and-the-lords-supper/>

Westminster Confession online <https://tinyurl.com/ydc75uwq>

Book of Church Order online <https://www.pcaac.org/bco/>