

## Facts and Faith:

# What we know to be true in the face of a pandemic

A Faculty Opinion in the Tradition of *Gutachten*

WHEN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FINALLY COMES TO A HALT, as all things do, both church and state will likely look back at these times and acknowledge that some decisions made in an attempt to protect the physical health of those entrusted to their care were reasonable, while others were unreasonable. This is to be expected when fallible human beings approach the unknown.

Public officials strive to follow the best scientific and medical advice in establishing policy. We Christians ought to be thankful when they carry out their God-given vocation faithfully. At the same time, their decisions may be marred by either a lack or an excess of caution, distorted by political motives, or simply limited by inadequate advice and knowledge. And, of course, their scope embraces only this-worldly concerns. In our thoroughly secularised society, our leaders no longer value the work of the Church. Public worship, reception of the sacraments, and pastoral care are deemed non-essential, as leaders focus exclusively on protecting physical (and not spiritual) health.

The Church will therefore assess the evidence and gauge the needs of her people according to different criteria. Certainly, Christian pastors and churches must sift through the evidence diligently and wisely in order to decide how to apply public policy to their unique situation. In the process there is an ever-present danger of playing “armchair scientist”, questioning public policy and thereby trespassing on other people’s vocations (AC 28:13). But while respect is due to the experts, the task is made confoundingly difficult by a surplus of conflicting scientific and medical opinions, in which context the Christian theologian is merely an amateur.

Christians, however, are privy to a different kind of knowledge that applies to a different realm. Together with the physical, Christians are concerned about *spiritual* welfare; when the two come into irreconcilable conflict, Christians will choose the greater good (Lk. 10:42). Only the Word of Jesus can tell us what this is. For this reason, the Church must even be ready, when necessary, to “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

As theologians, the responsibility of this seminary faculty is to speak the Word of Christ that is needful for us to hear in this situation. Only His Word can tell us what is true beyond all doubt. What we know to be true is what

Christ tells us. The seminary faculty have received numerous requests for guidance from LCC's pastors and people. The following brief comments are offered as a response to the Church proceeding from this foundation.

## A "New Normal"?

A sober historical perspective is not the exclusive possession of Christian theologians. But as the phrase "unprecedented situation" is repeated *ad nauseam*, those who know history are obliged to question it, recalling the countless epidemics that have plagued the world since the time of the New Testament. Throughout each crisis the Church and her ministers have been present with the faithful people in their suffering, offering the succour of God's healing Word and sacraments. What is "unprecedented" in this latest crisis is governments' side-lining the Church's ministry, locking her doors, and presuming to tell her that live-streaming services is an adequate substitute.

As our leaders look ahead to our emergence from this crisis, whether they envision a regular, seasonal return of a coronavirus pandemic or conquering the disease through an effective vaccine, they repeat a second slogan: we must be prepared for a "new normal". To some extent this is a truism. In many small ways our daily lives will be changed irrevocably. Just as SARS led to the ubiquitous dispensers of hand sanitiser and 9/11 meant pocket knives would be confiscated at airport security, so COVID-19 will lead to permanent changes in practice and behaviour, like high water marks left behind when a flood recedes.

For crucial reasons, however, Christians must not accede to talk of a "new normal". Yes, we can recall countless recoveries from war and pestilence, and we should remind our world that "this, too, shall pass". But more importantly, we confess that Christ is the Lord of history, "the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb. 13:8). We know that the Father "who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:6) holds us in His hand and will not let us go (Jn 15:28f.). Clinging to His promises, we must be confident that we will return to the "normal" that He has graciously established and wills for us. We must not be tempted to think that the world can no longer accommodate the ways and deeds of historic, biblical Christianity, as if the gifts of Christ given out in the way He instituted are obsolete and have no place in the "new normal".

This exhortation to return to the "old normal" will be applied concretely to the practice of the Lord's Supper below. But the implications are broader. While vulnerable parishioners may choose to wear masks and will be conscientious about keeping their distance from other congregants, we must

consider the message of fear and doubt conveyed if masks become an ongoing feature of public worship. In some jurisdictions authorities have forbidden singing (or even brass music) on the basis of dubious and disputed evidence that it might spread the virus more effectively than speaking. The devil is delighted when he can silence our praise. Here, too, the Christian must have confidence that what God has instituted is for our good. Singing His praises is not an optional part of worship (Psalms *passim*; Eph. 5:19).

One day, of course, there will be a “new normal”. Christ Himself will change all things at His return. The world and all that is in it will be burned up and remade (II Pet. 3:10). We, His people, will be called up to meet Him in the air (I Thess. 4:17), to process with Him into the eternal banquet. Christians need to maintain such an eschatological focus in the midst of what the world around us considers to be an apocalyptic-scale crisis. Neither nuclear war nor climate change nor over-population nor pollution nor pandemic will destroy the world or human life upon it. Such things will never separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35). We are not to fear those people (or things) who can kill the body but not the soul, but rather to fear the God who can destroy—and preserve—both (Mt. 10:28). On That Day He will judge us for our faithfulness in maintaining or abandoning what He has given us to do. Until He chooses to do so, we must leave the “normal” in His hands.

Thus, we ought to be exceedingly cautious in speaking about a “new normal” in regard to how we conduct worship in the future. Changes in society are not the norm for the conduct of Word and Sacrament ministry, but rather the mandate and institution of Christ to which we are bound at all times to return.

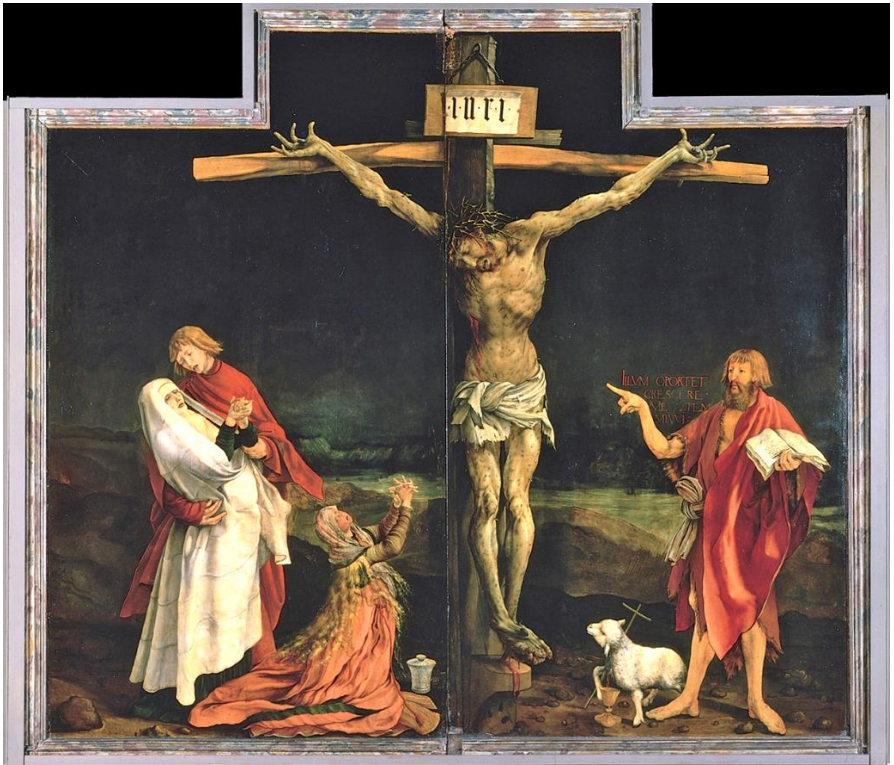
## The Virtue and Vice of the Virtual

It has been often remarked that the present lockdown would have been much harder to take only a decade ago, when live-streaming and video-conferencing were the preserve of experts. We can be thankful that from a tiny handheld device a pastor can broadcast his proclamation of God’s Word and invite his flock to join him (though they are unseen) in prayer and praise. We rejoice that faith, which comes from hearing (Rom. 10:17), can be strengthened and preserved in this way.

But to be content with such limited, virtual access to the grace of God is akin to remaining in the age of the Old Testament prophets and demurring with thankless hearts that the coming of Christ in the flesh was wholly unnecessary. “In many and various ways God spoke to His people of old by the prophets, but now in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son” (Heb. 1:1f.). God was not content to leave His people with the distant word of a

prophetic mediator. He chose to bridge the gap by coming in the flesh. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt [tabernacled] among us” (Jn 1:14). In that flesh, Jesus did not stand aloof, but entered into the homes of tax collectors and sinners, to the great consternation of the Pharisees (Mt. 9:10f.). They were concerned about contracting impurity or disease from such people. But Jesus came precisely in order to bear our iniquities and illnesses (Isaiah 53).

In the foyer of our seminary, a reproduction of the Isenheim altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald vividly depicts this theology by showing Christ on the cross distorted and pock-marked by the ravages of the plague which was afflicting the patients cared for in the monastery where it had been installed. At the altar He was with them in their suffering. Christ is by no means afraid of meeting with us and wants us to have no fear in meeting with Him: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16).



Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald, 1512. Wikimedia Commons.

God’s desire to enter into our sin-sick lives through the incarnation of Christ is most vividly enacted in the Lord’s Supper. The Sacrament of the Altar is the high point of the Christian Church’s weekly gathering. The

preaching of the Word is meant to lead us to the altar, to prepare us for intimate communion with our God, which one day will reach its fulfilment when we sit at the eternal banquet table before His very face. As much as live-streaming can faithfully broadcast the oral Word, it cannot carry out this ultimate function. The Lord's Supper can never be virtual. The Lutheran Reformation fought for the actual Communion of the people in profound preference to the mediaeval spectacle of "virtual Communion" by mere observation. The gifts are given from mouth to ear and from hand to mouth as through the minister Christ once again enters into the midst of "tax collectors and sinners" like us.

No medium is neutral, as men like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman have so convincingly demonstrated. For better or worse, screens alter the character of what they present. A medium that is primarily used for entertainment, information, or even manipulation can never be a wholly appropriate vehicle for conveying the holy things of God. Reverence falls victim when the service is delivered to our televisions and computers, when worshippers sit on couches and rightly feel awkward about standing and kneeling, involving their bodies in an event that is so obviously not "real". A one-way medium cannot accommodate the two-way path of worship. Proclamation that is not accompanied by prayer, praise, and thanksgiving is as dysfunctional as a heart that pumps out but fails to draw back the depleted blood. Thus, while it is obvious that the Lord's Supper cannot be received online, there are good theological reasons to be cautious even in trumpeting the value of virtual preaching.

Thus pastors will need to be careful not to judge hastily those parishioners who choose not to participate in virtual worship and instead hold a physical service of the Word at home. Such concerned consciences may well be choosing the better portion. As our churches re-open for public worship, pastors must also be prepared to address the opposite problem of those who will choose to continue to worship "virtually" instead of gathering before the Lord with the faithful—a catastrophe (in part) of our own making.

As we implement safety precautions, we must likewise anticipate the unintended consequences of such changes. What message will be conveyed to our children (indeed to all our members) if the pastor preaches and presides in a mask and gloves? Do we wish to teach our people that the divine service is dangerous, something to be feared? Do we wish to hide the face and hands of Jesus from those who come to Him in weakness and distress? What a contradiction it would be to deliver the Aaronic benediction through a mask! If Jesus did not hold back from entering the homes of the lowest in society, so too should those who stand in His stead, speaking for Him and giving out His Body and Blood, show His gracious face without fear.

There will be long-term repercussions if our churches introduce new practices in response to this disease, as dreadful and deadly as it has indeed been. Masks and physical distancing, whether they are necessary for a time or not, must not become the norm among the family of God gathered in their Father's house.

## **What Did Our Lord Institute? And What Did He Know?**

The Church's practice of the Lord's Supper is normed not by public health directives or individual freedom, but rather by Christ's institution. Note how Paul anchors his instructions to the Corinthian church in faithful delivery of this mandate:

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." (I Cor. 11:23-25 ESV)

The detailed liturgical instructions of the Old Testament remind us that God is perfectly capable (!) of anticipating the contingencies of life among His people. When He wishes, God can provide detailed instructions for every circumstance. And yet, in instituting His Supper, the Lord Jesus did what He did, and bade us do what He did. No qualifications. He unambiguously commanded the eating of consecrated bread and drinking from the common cup of blessing. The very word "communion" (κοινωνία) means the reception of something in common, both the earthly elements and the divine gifts they contain (I Cor. 10:16f.).

It is tempting in the arrogance of our modern age to think we know so much better than our forefathers. We understand how disease is communicated; we can take pictures of viruses and find them on surfaces. This arrogance is not entirely justified. Even in the Middle Ages people understood that disease was conveyed from person to person and they debated whether or not to hold public services or flee the plague. But in a time of greater faith, they tended to trust the Lord.

The first century, in which Jesus took bread and wine and instituted their common eating in the Sacrament, was also a time of widespread disease. And yet our Lord did what He did. It would be fallacious at numerous levels to assert that Jesus would not have instituted the Sacrament as He did if He had only known what plagues we would be suffering today. This shocking supposition falters on the fact that far worse and more untreatable illnesses ravaged ancient peoples. More importantly, it calls into question both the

divinity and the gracious purposes of our Lord. Jesus knew how disease was spread; He foresaw every crisis in human history. And yet He instituted for His Church a common meal with a common cup.

To this common meal Christ attached great promises of the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Life, not death! Like any good father who would not give a snake to his child when he asks for a fish (Mt. 7:10), our heavenly Father does not give us, His children, a meal that will harm us. Luther's oft-repeated words must be heard again:

We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body has benefited also. Why, then, do we act as if the sacrament were a poison which would kill us if we ate of it? (LC 5:68)

When we receive the Lord's Body into our mouths from the pastor's hand, when we drink from the common chalice, we have nothing to fear.

The life offered in the Sacrament of the Altar is, of course, a heavenly and hidden sort of life. There is no clear Word of Scripture to support the notion that no illness could ever be contracted during the reception of the Sacrament. While the Sacrament itself will not harm those who commune worthily, we may possibly be infected by those with whom we commune. Christians suffer even while doing good (I Pet. 2:20). God's purpose in allowing suffering is not always clear (e.g. Job!). Yet faith accepts that it is better to be faithful to God and receive His gifts as He wishes to give them than to say, "no, I know better." God can work good even in or through suffering (Rom. 8:28). Throughout history, when war and disease threatened God's people, they ran to His house and gifts for shelter and care, not away from them.

The world fears death above all because it knows nothing of eternal life. The Christian knows that physical death is an enemy overcome by Christ's resurrection. Death has lost its sting (I Cor. 15:54-57). There are countless stories of our Lutheran forefathers continuing to provide pastoral services during the plague, in spite of the possibility of becoming infected themselves. And indeed some died with their people. These faithful and courageous ambassadors of Christ teach us that there are some things worth dying for. In the early church, tales are told of bishops who had to prevent Christians from seeking martyrdom, volunteering to enter the colosseum. Still today, Christians continue to meet in places where assemblies are illegal (e.g. the Middle East or China), despite the risk of government officials finding and executing them. They count the cost and weigh the risk, but value the spiritual benefit more highly. With Paul they know, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

## A Family, Not a Crowd

Public health advice in the current pandemic recognises that families who live under one roof cannot distance themselves from one another. They share all things, and if one becomes ill it is likely and unavoidable that others will follow. For married couples this is part of the “in sickness and in health” to which they commit themselves. Parents gladly suffer with their children—and would suffer in their place, if it were possible.

When extended families gather, the bubble is expanded. We lay out food on a common table, eating “family style”. We may sample something scrumptious from a cousin’s plate, or pass a glass of craft beer from brother to brother to taste. There is always some risk of passing germs, but the family bond is more important. Naturally, we behave differently with strangers.

The Bible pictures the Church not as a collection of strangers but as a family, sons of God through incorporation into Christ (Gal. 3:26) and brothers and sisters of one another (Heb. 2:11). This new family relationship transcends or sometimes even replaces our physical family (Mt. 12:46-50). To say that the Church is our family is more than just a sentimental platitude. Our bond with our brothers and sisters in Christ is higher and stronger than blood ties, and will persist into the eternal banquet of heaven after family ties are dissolved.

The Lord’s Supper is thus not a restaurant serving strangers but a family meal. Christ presides as *pater familias* over a table at which His younger brothers and sisters recline. We take holy bread from His hand and drink from the cup He offers without fear or scruples, as we would participate in a family meal in our own home. Adopting this biblical attitude will lead to an entirely different approach to the holy Sacrament than the world would promote.

## Is the Science against the Faith?

In offering a few concluding thoughts on medical and scientific matters, we do not intend to trespass onto territory beyond our expertise. But since scientific evidence is often used to call into question the practice of the Lord’s Supper as Christ instituted it and the Church has observed it, some comments are necessary.

Firstly, Christians must avoid the danger of “scientism”, the idea that only science is able to answer the important questions of human life. Such a view proceeds from a denial of spiritual realities and posits a purely physical explanation for all things. Thus, presuming to be true what it simply asserts (begging the question), scientism fails to be truly scientific. People fall into this trap when they think that medical science alone can tell us how to



observe the Lord's Supper in a safe manner, to the exclusion or diminishing of theological reflection on God's Word.

Scientism can appear in various guises. Even apart from this pandemic, it arises, for example, when churches presume to change the instituted elements (substituting grape juice for wine) in response to medical concerns about the physical or psychological dangers of alcohol for some people. Such concerns, while legitimate, represent only one field of knowledge. Pastoral care requires consideration of theological realities, including Christ's institution and what is *spiritually* healthy. Scientism presumes to speak facts in opposition to faith; Christian theology acknowledges that there are other truths that must be brought to bear.

Secondly, even within the realm of medical science difficult conflicts can arise. As important as the fight against this pandemic is for public health, there is growing concern about other significant health problems that are arising or going untreated. Patients with cancer, for example, have had treatments cancelled or postponed for fear of catching the coronavirus in the hospital. The stress of lockdown has led to a spike in mental illness and even suicide. Treating one disease has come at the expense of others, and the time finally comes when doctors choose to proceed with the more vital care even at risk of patients' catching the virus. In a similar way, the Church has an obligation to offer vital spiritual care to treat the ongoing illness of sin, with its consequent distress and despair, that remains deadly serious even during a pandemic.

Thirdly, it is important to listen to what doctors and scientists are actually saying. For example: scientific experiments have demonstrated that the coronavirus can survive for hours or days on surfaces. In theory the disease can be contracted by touching these surfaces and carrying the virus to the eyes or nose. There is therefore good reason for caution, not touching the face while in public places, etc. But our leaders and the general public regularly ignore the qualification medical scientists put on these warnings: touching surfaces is not the usual way in which the virus is transmitted; the risk is actually quite minimal. The normal way the virus is transmitted is through airborne droplets that are breathed in. The disease cannot be contracted through the skin (even open wounds) or through eating food. These facts are relevant to the practice of the Lord's Supper and indicate that it is (medically speaking) far less risky than extended close personal contact.

Fourthly, then, in the present crisis we must be careful to distinguish between the possible and the probable. Once we defend against the most *probable* causes of transmission (through physical distancing), the *possible* causes recede in significance behind countless other risks in life. Thus it is important from a purely human perspective to assess risk in a sensible manner.

It is quite impossible to hold public worship with zero risk to physical health. But not to hold worship entails grave dangers of a spiritual nature. The Church must endeavour to minimise risk to physical health; but her primary obligation is to provide such spiritual care.

Thus, what is most important is to approach the dangers and worries of life from the perspective of faith. “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Mt. 7:11). “Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Mt. 10:31). God’s perfect love drives out fear (I Jn. 4:18).

The faculty of Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, St. Catharines, offer these biblical reflections to encourage confidence in God’s goodness and faithfulness to Christ’s mandates as the Church reconvenes for public worship.

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The Third Week after Pentecost 2020