

Offer Them Christ Face-To-Face:
A Response to Central Online's Proposal
For Online Eucharistic Celebration

"Last and most important, it is exactly this which explains what is so inexplicable to all the modern critics of the history of Christianity. I mean the monstrous wars about small points of theology, the earthquakes of emotion about a gesture or a word. It was only a matter of an inch; but an inch is everything when you are balancing."

-G.K. Chesterton¹

"Flesh and blood meets flesh and blood, and you're the one I need."

-Johnny Cash²

Introduction

I appreciate the opportunity to read "Offer Them Christ" and reflect on an exciting new ministry at Central UMC. Moreover, I am grateful for the efforts that have been taken to align this new worship experience with the best of United Methodist practice and doctrine. I was pleasantly surprised at the number of church leaders and liturgical experts who have already examined this proposal and I am glad that the leadership of Central Online has attempted to think through this with the mind of the church and in a truly connectional spirit. Though I have read both the paper and its supporting documents, I still have reservations about this new direction in sacramental practice

¹ *Orthodoxy* (Mineola: Dover 2004), 93.

² "Flesh and Blood," Written by Johnny Cash and Glen Ballard; performed by Johnny Cash. Full lyrics: <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/johnnycash/fleshandblood.html>

based on the following: the importance of gathering as an aspect of worship; the *Catfish* phenomenon and social media's encouragement of false intimacy and community; certain important elements of Eucharistic theology and practice that seem to be at stake; and, finally, the tensions between the call to mission and the call to be faithful stewards of the Christian story and the dignity of the sacraments.

Part I. The Significance of Gathering

In a verse pregnant with Eucharistic language, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."³ Implicit in this passage is the notion that, for Christ to sate our deepest hunger and thirst, we must go to him. Gathering – leaving home or work to go worship – is an integral aspect of Christian worship generally, and a critical aspect of the Eucharist in particular. The important ecumenical document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* names gathering as part of the service saying, "In the celebration of the Eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the Church."⁴ Of course, the witness of the church throughout the ages is not of one accord on the importance of gathering for the Eucharist. Masses for the dead were popular in the Medieval period, and were often celebrated by individual priests absent any worshipping community. Protestants, following Luther's reform of the Mass, have generally disagreed with this practice.

³ John 6:35 (CEB)

⁴ From the so-called "Lima Text" from the Faith & Order Commission of the WCC, accessed at: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>. *This Holy Mystery* also affirms the importance of the community gathering to receive the Sacrament.

Because the bread we break makes the many of the assembly “one,” it is generally assumed that there must be a community to share the communal meal.

Alexander Schmemmann beautifully describes how the high point of the church’s worship, the Supper inaugurated by Jesus himself, begins with gathering as the Body of Christ:

“The journey begins when Christians leave their homes and beds. They leave, indeed, their life in this present and concrete world, and whether they have to drive fifteen miles or walk a few blocks, a sacramental act is already taking place, an act which is the very condition of everything else that is to happen. For they are now on their way to constitute the church, or to be more exact, to be transformed into the church of God.”⁵

The gathering itself is sacramental, holy, and a part of the larger Eucharistic celebration. The Sacrament, moreover, is held by the church to be worth the trip. Given the holiness of the occasion, it does not seem too much to ask God’s people (who are able) to come and be present to receive.

One of John Wesley’s favorite spiritual authors suggests that, were the Bread and Cup only offered at one place in the whole world, it would be worth travelling to witness and receive:

“If this most holy Sacrament were celebrated in only one place and consecrated by only one priest in the whole world, with what great desire, do you think, would [people] be attracted to that place, to that priest of God, in order to witness the celebration of the divine Mysteries!”⁶

I agree very much with the spirit of Central Online’s desire to offer the Eucharist with regularity. More United Methodist Christians need to opportunity to receive, and often cannot in their local church more than once a quarter (if that). We should remember

⁵ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1973), 27.

⁶ Thomas a’ Kempis, *Imitation of Christ* (Mineola: Dover 2003), 118.

with a' Kempis, however, that the Lord's Supper is worthy of a trip across town to receive.

Furthermore, the Eucharist is a social act, an act where the Body of Christ both receives and becomes that which she is called to be. Discipleship is always an act of renunciation. This is true from the beginning, as we see in gospels how the first disciples had to leave their nets and their families. Likewise, as John Howard Yoder reminds us in his reflections on the Supper, Jesus calls us to "leave" that we might gather as a new community. We must remember,

“...the simple social fact, undeniable in the record but often not taken to be important, that men and women left their jobs, homes, and families to constitute with Jesus a new ‘family,’ a community of consumption, in which he exercised the role of head-of-household.”⁷

Today, no less than in the first century, we are called as Jesus-followers to leave behind some things in order to come to him. Here the typical UM celebration of Communion is instructive. It is a United Methodist practice, in most places, that congregants are asked to come forward to receive the elements; the Bread and Cup are not simply passed around, but instead we must get up and decide (in response to the invitation and other aspects of the liturgy) to come forward and receive – or not. In a similar way, it is appropriate to ask persons to come to a gathering of the community (it need not be in a sanctuary or on church property, of course), to leave something behind, in order to be present at God's table.

In summation, the gathering of God's people matters. It is itself an act of worship; we take time that could be spent at a movie or on the golf course, and gather

⁷ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2001), 18.

as the church to feed on the “true food and true drink” that is offered by Christ.⁸ True food and true drink demand a true gathering, a true community, not a digital analog. Gathering is a witness to the world – a world where it makes perfect sense to spend hours at the shopping mall or surfing puppy videos on YouTube – that it is worth leaving behind these things for a time to experience the particular grace that is God’s people at worship. Let us recover the joy of which the Psalmist sung: “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let’s go to the Lord’s house!’”⁹

Even as we seek to reach out to new generations in new ways, we must not lose a sense of what Bonhoeffer would call ‘costly’ grace: the recognition that Jesus calls us away from the life we used to live, perhaps even the life that we would prefer to live, and gives us a new family, a new heart, a new sense of what truly matters. Through Christian worship we are formed into people who live out their worship of the triune God. After all, the ways we spend our time, treasure, and talent each and every day speak to the things which we truly worship:

“Every human life is an embodied argument about what things are worth doing, who or what is worthy of attention, who or what is worthy of allegiance and sacrifice, and what objects or endeavors are worthy of human energies. In short, every human life is ‘bent’ towards something. Every human life is an act of worship.”¹⁰

The Eucharist is considered by most Christians to be the high point of worship, a “thin place”¹¹ where the veil between heaven and earth is drawn back for a time and we truly glimpse the eternal. If anything we do is worthy of an actual, physical meeting, it is the

⁸ John 6:55, paraphrased.

⁹ Psalm 122:1 (CEB).

¹⁰ Philip Kenneson, “Worship, Imagination, and Formation” in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell 2006), 54.

¹¹ This language is from Celtic spirituality, and often applied to the experience of Holy Communion.

celebration of Holy Communion. All of this begs the question: to what extent is an online gathering a true gathering? For that, we turn to the next section.

Part II. The Limits of Online Community and the Call to Incarnational Community

One of the original goals of the ecumenical movement a generation ago was visible unity. While there is a great deal that various Christian bodies agree upon, most of what divides us comes to a head when it comes time to celebrate the Lord's Supper. It was the hope of the authors of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (heavily influenced by Geoffrey Wainwright) that,

“The increased mutual understanding expressed in the present statement may allow some churches to attain a greater measure of Eucharistic communion among themselves and so bring closer the day when Christ's divided people will be visibly reunited around the Lord's Table.”¹²

The hope was for a “visible” unity around the Lord's Table, reflecting the eschatological hope (via Revelation 19) of the marriage supper of the Lamb, when God's people gather victoriously and harmoniously as evil is decisively defeated. If the Eucharist is, as it has often been understood to be, the sacrament of church unity *par excellence*, it seems strange to celebrate in a manner that encourages distance and anonymity (between the communicants themselves and between communicants and the church).

Indeed, Holy Communion is best viewed as the place where authentic community is created. Brian Wren beautifully put this sense into song:

¹² *Baptism, Eucharist, & Ministry*.

*I come with Christians far and near
to find, as all are fed,
the new community of love
in Christ's communion bread.*

*As Christ breaks bread and bids us share,
each proud division ends.
The love that made us makes us one,
and strangers now are friends.¹³*

The jury is still out on the extent to which authentic community can be replicated online. The documentary-turned-reality-show *Catfish* displays the ease and regularity with which persons can form very deep relationships through social media, texting, and other digital media. Unfortunately, it also showcases the ways in which people who are deeply wounded, morally flawed, or simply bored can use these means to create (often deceptive) pseudo-relationships with people while keeping them at arm's length. The results of this can be heart-wrenching. The origin of the title says speaks volumes: fishermen discovered that live cod, while being shipped across the ocean, would often grow ill and die through inactivity and illness on the long journey. They discovered that if catfish were added to the water, the cod would keep moving and thus stay alive long enough to reach their final destination. Likewise, there are people who seem to keep others moving, though in reality their motives are often less than virtuous in nature. The purpose of *Catfish* is to expose deception and bring people together who have, despite often carrying on long and intimate relationships, not yet met. The MTV show's reception (it is now in season 2) is proof of a growing sense of the dangers of online relationships and the spurious sense of intimacy which often accompanies such associations.¹⁴

¹³ "I Come With Joy, A Child of God," by Brian Wren. Accessed at: <http://www.oremus.org/hymnal/i/i032.html>.

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catfish:_The_TV_Show

None of this is a reason, of course, for the church to avoid social media and other digital communications. It only serves to raise questions about whether or not we can say that an online gathering – whether through a Facebook page, a Google Hangout, a Twitter chat, or something similar – is the same in kind and quality to a face-to-face gathering of persons. N.T. Wright has wisely warned of

“...the microchip revolution, which has generated and sustained a world in which creating new apparent realities, living in one’s own private world and telling one’s own story even though it does not cohere with anybody else’s, is easier and easier.”¹⁵

Does the Lord’s Supper demand a community of persons who can pass the peace with more than a few strokes of the keyboard?

The internet, while certainly an invaluable communication tool, can also be used as a private retreat from reality. This militates against the essentially communal nature of the Eucharist, which originated in an intimate meal between Christ and his disciples. The earliest Christian documents, Paul’s letters, indicate the importance of both the Supper and its social implications. Gerhard Lofhink suggests that the root of the Communion controversy at Corinth was the loss of this communal-ethical dimension:

“The problem was sacramental individualism: the Eucharist was apparently regarded as an individual reception of salvation independent of the community... That the Eucharist was a common meal, still more, that it made Jesus present in his servanthood’s self-surrender and therefore had to have consequences for life together within the community was not seen.”¹⁶

Does a Eucharist celebrated via the internet discourage such privatism or exacerbate it?

The essay that the leadership of Central Online produced indicates that participants will be encouraged to receive in groups or as families. This is of course positive, but it also

¹⁵ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press 1999), 152.

¹⁶ Gerhard Lofhink, *Does God Need the Church?* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 156-157.

begs the question: if community is important to the sacrament, why offer it in a way that can be wholly individualized?

To examine the degree to which the internet can serve as a substitute for face-to-face relationships, it might be helpful to look at other spheres of activity and relationship in which the internet is used to provide a substitute. After all, people use social media and other technology to “participate” in various communities of all kinds. In some cases, the internet is distorting our view of how real life and relationships should work. Lauren Winner has pointed out the “pornification” of sex in the internet era, arguing that it “encourages a subterranean sexual individualism.”¹⁷ Increasingly, pornography is accepted as a harmless vice in our society, a means to an end and a normalized substitute for real intimacy and healthy sexuality. There is a real question as to whether or not the church should be in the business of underwriting such substitutions or of pointing people to something better. After all, the internet and new media are used not just to fulfill sexual desires, but also to fill the void of affection and companionship.

In an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, the socially awkward genius Sheldon Cooper is intimidated by a budding relationship with a fellow scientist, Amy Farrah Fowler.¹⁸ It is a running joke throughout season four that Amy is infatuated with Sheldon, but Sheldon, not caring for personal intimacy, attempts to keep their relationship from progressing (part of this episode revolves around whether or not Amy is actually his girlfriend). In response to pressure for them to spend more quality time together, Sheldon caves and agrees, in a manner of speaking. Later in the episode, his roommate Leonard discovers that Amy is in the room – via a Skype-like technology on

¹⁷ Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos 2005), 113.

¹⁸ “The Desperation Emanation,” Season 4, Episode 5.

Sheldon's laptop. The joke is, of course, obvious: being socially inadequate, Sheldon has chosen to "hang out" with his quasi-girlfriend via a medium that allows him to remain essentially alone. The implication is clear that their "date" is a poor stand-in for actual time together. There is a lesson here for faith communities as well. While there is great potential in internet and social media technologies, there are some things – especially in the sphere of relationships – that cannot be easily copied in the digital world.¹⁹ This calls us to reflect further on the particularities of liturgiology and Eucharistic celebration, and how they interact with the digital world.

Part III. Sacramental Theology & Practice

The leadership of Central Online is to be commended for insisting that the online Eucharist is only celebrated when a licensed or ordained staff member is present via a live feed. Contrary to how some other churches and individuals have attempted such services, there is to be no recorded service played back or do-it-yourself communion based on internet videos. Part of this is based on UMC doctrine, which does not recognize a reserved sacrament (spelled out in a Judicial Council decision named in the essay). But if this affirms one classic Protestant position vis-à-vis the Eucharist, it rejects another: namely, the injunctions against private masses. Since no other

¹⁹ Murray Jardine has forcefully called the church to offer an alternative to a world that is awash in technology: "The only possible alternative to this exhausted culture would be a culture based on the biblical understanding of God, the world, and humanity because only this understanding can make sense of human creative capacities and their technological manifestation. Thus what is required is the formation of local communities that can put the biblical understanding of human agency into practice to develop an alternative to liberal capitalist democracy as it approaches its collapse...Doing so, however, is likely to be quite difficult, because these places depend upon an appreciation of the speech-dimension of human experience that is largely lost in the hypervisuality of late bourgeois culture. In order to establish such places, then it will be essential to reconstruct face-to-face communities where people actually do talk to each other more." See Murray Jardine, *The Making and Unmaking of Technological Society: How Christianity Can Save Modernity From Itself* (Grand Rapids: Brazos 2004), 279.

congregation members are present,²⁰ but watching via webcam or other similar means, this method of online communion is essentially a reinstatement of the private masses so despised by the Reformers. James White describes the controversy thus:

“In late medieval Christianity in the West, the congregation was a dispensable item. Thousands of masses were said each day for the repose of the dead in what were essentially private masses... Three elements stand out in Luther’s reform of the mass: a congregation must be present, it must hear the preaching of the Word, and it must be able to participate in the Eucharist.”²¹

While this proposal is laudable for the insistence that Word is connected to Sacrament (either through preaching or Scripture reading), it fails at least partially the other two tests of Luther’s reform.²²

Another problematic feature of Central Online’s plan is confusion about the proposed audience. A leap is consistently made in the essay between those who cannot come – the UMC affirms (especially in *This Holy Mystery*) the need for the homebound, sick, imprisoned, etc. to receive the Eucharist – and those who simply will not or do not come. While it is indeed an act of grace to “extend the table” to those who cannot come, the fact that some do not choose to come is not a justification for the kind of sea change that online communion would be to our practice. Again, a Kempis is a helpful teacher on this distinction:

“If, now and then, a man abstains by the grace of humility or for a legitimate reason, his reverence is commendable, but if laziness takes hold of him, he must arouse himself and do everything in his power, for the Lord will quicken his desire because of the good intention to which He particularly looks. When he is indeed

²⁰ I believe there is ongoing discussion about whether other community members would/will be present with the presiding pastor. The initial plans seemed to indicate to the author that the celebrant would be on their own.

²¹ James White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Faith and Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon 1999), 90-91.

²² “It is most wrong,” argued Luther, “if ministers make ready and adorn the common Supper of the Lord where there would be no guests who would eat and drink, and they alone, who ought to minister to others, would eat and drink at an empty table and in an empty sanctuary.” Quoted in Nathan D. Mitchell, “Reforms, Protestant and Catholic” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Wainwright and Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press 200), 318.

unable to come, he will always have the good will and pious intention to communicate and thus he will not lose the fruit of the Sacrament.”²³

Thomas a’ Kempis’ Eucharistic piety is an excellent reminder for the distinction between those unable to come to receive the sacrament and those who are unwilling – and the different pastoral implications of those situations.

Furthermore, the attempt at an online service of Holy Communion seems to run counter to the story the Sacrament tells, and to which it joins us. “Participation in the Eucharist is...a confession of the resurrection hope (cf. John 6:53f),” says Geoffrey Wainwright.²⁴ Just as the gospels go to great pains to ensure us that Jesus was present with the disciples bodily – eating and drinking, no less – so too, the Lord’s Supper is a participation in the story of Jesus’ very tangible suffering and death, as well as a foretaste of that heavenly banquet in which we, with redeemed, inspirited, and immortal flesh, will feast in the completed New Creation. In short, an online Eucharist takes embodied grace and translates it into a sort of gnostic imitation, a disembodied attempt at a practice which is, by nature, quite physical.

Some things simply cannot be accomplished using digital means. I doubt we will see the day, in the UMC at least, when ordinations are conducted over Skype, or weddings conducted via Google Hangout. There is something appropriate and deeply important about the laying on of hands by a bishop at ordination, or the joining of hands between an engaged couple about to take marriage vows before friends and family. To mention another important practice of the church, how could a foot washing be replicated online? In some cases, there is no substitute for physical contact. If these

²³ a’ Kempis, 129-130.

²⁴ Wainwright, 234.

things, which are not considered sacraments in our own tradition, could scarcely be done via the internet, then how much more unthinkable should it be for Communion to be reduced to a kind of voyeurism?

None of this undercuts my own gratitude for the fundamental thrust of Central Online's unique endeavor, which is Wesleyan to the core: Holy Communion is a "converting ordinance," a means of grace that is indispensable to vital Christian living. The recognition of this, however, does not automatically necessitate attempts at sharing this holy meal in ways that undercut its dignity and its story. The solution needed for Christians who are not present and yet wish to Commune is, instead, much simpler. Emerging Methodist scholar Andrew Thompson argues,

"The answer here isn't Communion over the Internet. It is instead a type of ministry so basic it is often neglected: pastoral visitation. And this is not a ministry of ordained pastors only, but of laity as well...In this way, the worship of the whole community is brought to the shut-in physically through the church's ministry of pastoral care."²⁵

Thompson was reacting to a proposal to celebrate via pre-recorded videos, but I believe his counter-proposal holds weight for Central Online's plan as well. If indeed it is better to receive the sacrament in community, as the proposal suggests, then why not send teams from the brick-and-mortar church to take the consecrated elements to those who wish to receive it? Barring that, why not find locations in the community where members of Central Online could gather for a simple service of Word & Table on a regular basis?

Lastly, there are serious questions about using the theological principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* to justify this practice. Usually translated "the rule of prayer is the rule of faith," this classic theological premise names the important role that worship

²⁵ "Can We Really Celebrate Holy Communion Online," United Methodist Reporter, accessed at: See more at: <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=4414#sthash.VAQjvdQY.dpuf>.

plays in forming Christian doctrine. The essay offered by Central Online uses this laudable teaching to justify a “try it first, then come up with the theology” approach, but I am not so sure that this is the intent of the principle. Rather, it identifies the significant degree to which doctrine is shaped by Christian worship across time and geography; when a plurality of churches pray or sing to the triune God a certain way, for instance, this informal consensus in liturgical practice should then shape doctrinal confession. I do not think this is the same as a church deciding to take a leap in sacramental practice simply due to a lack of clear instruction otherwise.²⁶ Geoffrey Wainwright has suggested a tripartite test for whether or not liturgy should shape doctrine:

“We have, then, looked at three kinds of test – those of origin, of spread, and of ethical correspondence – that help to determine when worship, in its intended capacity as a meeting between humanity and God, can in fact properly be drawn on as a doctrinal source.”²⁷

Indeed, one is struck by how few examples there are of sacramental churches that have considered or attempted online Eucharistic celebration – and of these, how many were told to desist by church authorities or are now conducted by people without ties to the church of their ordination.²⁸ One is not surprised, of course, to find churches like Saddleback – which do not share our sacramental understanding of the Lord’s Supper – encouraging such practices.²⁹ But examples of Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians (and other traditions that value the Bread and Cup as more than bare symbols) attempting to celebrate online are so few that I do not believe the *lex orandi*,

²⁶ This has changed, of course, now that the Council of Bishops approved the UMC Consultation’s recommendation for a moratorium on online sacraments, though it is unclear that Central will abide by this. See: <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304868404579194423734251960>

²⁷ Wainwright, 245.

²⁸ In this regard, the examples in “Offer Them Christ” are not compelling. Dawn Chesser of GBOD has also done extensive research, as part of her dissertation, on which churches are doing this and in what manner.

²⁹ <http://saddleback.com/blogs/internetcampus/remember-christ-online-through-communion/>

lex credendi principle applies with any validity. The Orthodox³⁰ and Roman Catholics would certainly not assent to such a practice.³¹

The Methodist movement originated as both an evangelical and sacramental revival. Today, United Methodists are learning much from the Missional Church movement and others – often low-church and/or non-denominational evangelical traditions – about how to make disciples and carry out our mission today. I humbly suggest it would be in our best interests to learn from those who excel in mission about the practice of mission, and to learn from those who appreciate, honor, and regularly celebrate the sacraments – as did John Wesley – how best to shape those practices in the 21st century church.³² This leads us to our final consideration, namely, the tension between a robust theology of mission and the need to preserve and share the Christian story through the practices of the church, especially the practices that bring worship to its crescendo – the sacraments.

Part IV. Field Preaching as a Problematic Paradigm

Deep within our Wesleyan DNA is a desire to reach out to the least, the last, and the lost. The Wesleys, along with their sisters and brothers in the movement, lived out

³⁰ For an excellent example of online ministry by the Orthodox that takes full advantage of new media and digital technology, go to www.ancientfaith.com.

³¹ The example of EWTN does not seem to be a useful defense of the proposal for Central Online. While they play recorded Masses several times a day, viewing these worship services are not understood to be interchangeable to participating in the Mass and receiving the host, and there is no encouragement to receive self-service elements at home (instead, a prayer is offered on screen for those who cannot receive). Personal correspondence with EWTN about their understanding of and intent behind broadcasting the Mass are attached as addenda.

³² Wesley was not so much a Eucharistic innovator as he was a throwback. At a time when many Anglicans only communed once a year, he celebrated an average of twice a week and encouraged those in his care to receive frequently.

the radical call to social holiness by visiting prisons, ministering with the sick, and ensuring that working class children received education. Wesley famously “submitted to become more vile” and preach in the field when refused a pulpit, because he was so moved by love for the poor and laboring classes who were not welcome in the existing Anglican churches.³³ Such evangelistic fervor also shaped their approach to the Lord’s Table: Wesley held that Communion might hold the power to convert and as such, the Table should be seen as an opportunity for the lost to find Christ.³⁴ Based on such actions, Wesley is sometimes interpreted as a radical, an upstart preacher happy to go against the stodgy Anglicans of his day when they were backwards or short-sighted. This is not a complete picture, of course, and such interpretations probably say more about the interpreters than the man. Wesley died an Anglican priest, always remained convinced of the goodness of his church’s order, and generally did not go against their polity and doctrine unless absolutely necessary to fulfill God’s call. Field preaching is a problematic paradigm for this particular debate because John and Charles cannot easily be classified as rebels or Tories, as merely loyal Anglicans or upstarts who loved to buck the rules. It is doubtful that Wesley would simply bless any effort – *based on purely utilitarian reasoning* – which might reach people, regardless of how out of sync it might be with the larger Body of Christ. For Wesley, it was only extreme missional urgency that would cause him to break his church’s order as a last resort. This is an important reminder today, when churches under the influence of marketing strategies and business models are finding it increasingly tempting to leave behind, distort, or marginalize the sacraments in service to Christian mission:

³³As told in his Journal, accessed at: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.iii.i.html>.

³⁴ It should be noted, and frequently isn’t, that Wesley’s idea of an “open table” and ours are quite different – just ask Sophie Hopke.

“A more recent threat has come about through much of the church growth movement, which tries to minimize the gap between church and culture. While this has been successful in many instances in reaching out to the unchurched or the previously churched, it has tended to further marginalize the sacraments...as intrinsically irrelevant or even in conflict with our culture.”³⁵

To what extent should our celebration of the sacraments be shaped by the needs and wants of the surrounding culture? This is a perpetual tension in all of the church’s life – certainly in worship – but also in terms of her overall attitude and outlook.

Martin Marty offers an insightful reflection on the degree to which the culture should inform our worship practices, noting how the culture should engaged without being idolized:

“All serious church bodies are concerned that their traditional forms of worship...may not reach a generation whose sensibilities are shaped by supermarkets and television [and the internet?], where the attention span of a gnat is too long to use as a measure, immediate sensation is needed, and aesthetic mediocrity is demanded. To do nothing to adapt means stultification and, we are told, dwindling congregations. To give the whole store away to match what this year’s market says the unchurched want is to have the people who know least about faith determine most about its expression.”³⁶

At the very least, we should tread lightly when adapting our expression of faith to the needs of the unchurched. A medium is not neutral to how the message is delivered and received, and we should be cautious in trying to simply translate anything and everything in the church’s life to web-based facsimiles.

William Placher has hinted at the kind of mediating position for which I am searching. How does a church that is both evangelical and sacramental honor both

³⁵ White, 141.

³⁶ Martin Marty, quoted in Marva Dawn’s *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998), 258.

traditions? How do we live as people of the ‘extreme center’?³⁷ I find Placher’s conclusion, albeit from a different discussion, helpful:

“Of course we need to follow the gospel injunctions to reach out to all the world. Of course, in pursuit of all sorts of practical goals, we need to make all sorts of alliances with non-Christians. But we also need to make vivid the judgment the gospel casts against our culture. Perhaps, in service of such a witness, even a modest dose of sectarianism is not such a terrible thing.”³⁸

As Wesleyans, we cannot be indifferent to the manner in which our celebration (in quality, quantity, and method) of the sacraments enables or inhibits our ability to invite people into a saving relationship with Christ. As participants in the larger Body of Christ, and as stewards of the holy Mysteries of Communion and Baptism, we also must take seriously the call to honor our sacramental heritage. In short, Communion ought to be viewed as a means of grace and not, in a utilitarian manner, as just another “method” to increase our dwindling numbers.

In our worship and evangelism, we must seek to maintain the Christian story amid its many rivals today. Or, put in the form of a question, one might ask: what are we not willing to do in order to reach people? In fulfilling his own vocation, Jesus drew some important boundaries: he would not limit his message and work to the people of Israel; he refused to practice or condone violence to further his ends; he did not allow the expectations and norms of his own time and place to dictate his ministry (thus he ate with ‘sinners’, touched lepers, and plucked grain and healed on the Sabbath). Likewise, we must beware the temptation to shape one of the holiest moments in the life of the church based on the whims of a culture not formed by the Christian narrative:

³⁷ See Bishop Scott Jones’ excellent book, *United Methodist Doctrine: The Extreme Center* (Nashville: Abingdon 2002).

³⁸ William Placher, *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 1989), 169.

“If the proponents of what basically is nothing else but the Christian acceptance of secularism are right, then of course our whole problem is only that of finding or inventing a worship more acceptable, more ‘relevant’ to the modern [person]’s secular world view. And such indeed is the direction taken today by the great majority of liturgical reformers.”³⁹

We must always be reaching out – such is our vocation as the church and our participation in God’s reconciling work. But in the midst of reaching out, we must maintain our story, lest the church that we draw people into has been so determined by the world’s story that it is no longer distinguishable from the world itself, and no longer able to call people out of the world for the sake of world.⁴⁰

Robert Webber has put the question starkly: Who gets to narrate the world?⁴¹ For the church to be the church, she must tell her story in a way that is relatable, relevant, and understandable, and yet is also faithful to the story God revealed in Jesus, and to the way that story has been lived out in in the life of the church throughout the ages. A humble suggestion: What better witness than for a church to offer an online community with one caveat: like a door prize, you “must be present to win” when it comes to Communion or Baptism? This seems to me a reasonable compromise: reaching out to the digital age in its own language, but not allowing that medium to subsume everything. Webber admirably recognizes the church’s vocation to ‘meet people where they are’ alongside the need to maintain the Christian story:

“Of course, the church does fulfill needs, but they must be placed within the cosmic narrative... Worship has become narcissistic, focusing on me and my praise of God; and spirituality has turned toward a preoccupation with my journey of faith and my spiritual condition and experience. There is of course an appropriate place for my worship and spirituality, but when we become

³⁹ Schmemmann, 119.

⁴⁰ This allusion to the vocation of Israel and the Church is spelled out in Lofhink, cited above.

⁴¹ See Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World?* (Downer’s Grove: IVP 2008).

narcissistic, the place of worship and spirituality in God's narrative is lost and worship and spirituality become subject to the whims of culture."⁴²

I conclude with some insight from another field: cinema. Before his recent death, Roger Ebert was known as a strident critic of 3-D films. In an incisive article, he argues that Hollywood has a history of reaching for technology when it is in financial trouble. Desperate for dollars, studios are willing to sacrifice the enjoyment of the viewing experience and the quality of the films themselves in order to mass-market juvenile cinema that requires expensive gimmicks to view:

"I'm not opposed to 3-D as an option. I'm opposed to it as a way of life for Hollywood, where it seems to be skewing major studio output away from the kinds of films we think of as Oscar-worthy. Scorsese and Herzog make films for grown-ups. Hollywood is racing headlong toward the kiddie market. Disney recently announced it will make no more traditional films at all, focusing entirely on animation, franchises, and superheroes. I have the sense that younger Hollywood is losing the instinctive feeling for story and quality that generations of executives possessed. It's all about the marketing... The marketing executives are right that audiences will come to see a premium viewing experience they can't get at home. But they're betting on the wrong experience."⁴³

Like Hollywood, we in the church are attempting to coax people off of their sofas for an experience: not entertainment, not even art, but an encounter with the living God of Israel and the church. Like Ebert, I fear that we are losing our feel "for story and quality" and making decisions based on marketing calculations rather than the real needs of God's people and nature of worship. The Christian story, after all, is this: God came to us, in the 2nd person of the Trinity, as a flesh-and-blood savior. In memory of his saving work, and that we might be perfected in the salvation which he won, we were given a sacrament – a pledge of heaven – that we might never be apart from the grace-imbued flesh and blood of our Lord. Such a gift deserves to be celebrated often, for God's

⁴²Robert Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World? Contending for the Christian Story in an Age of Rivals* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press 2008), 131.

⁴³"Why I Hate 3D Movies," accessed at: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/04/30/why-i-hate-3-d-and-you-should-too.html>.

people need to receive this gift regularly. Moreover, it deserves to be celebrated as it was instituted: face-to-face, fully present in power, love, and grace.

An Appreciative & Personal Postscript

I want to reiterate my gratitude both for this opportunity to dialogue and for the exciting ministry of Central Online. There is great potential in the use of the internet and social media to invite people in new and fresh ways to Christian discipleship, particularly people who would not otherwise be drawn to a traditional church. The Body of Christ is, in every age, called to seek out fresh approaches to Christian community and to a re-appropriation of her traditions. I see Central Online as an innovative example of what Bishop Schnase has named 'Radical Hospitality.'⁴⁴ No matter what kind of worship one practices, a warm reception must always be on the menu. As Tom Long has pointed out, "there is no authentic Christian worship without a genuine welcome and hospitality to the stranger."⁴⁵ At its best, the church is a connector, connecting people to God and to each other. I appreciate the image of the church as an airport: no one goes to an airport to spend time in an airport; they go to an airport to get somewhere else. So too the church must always remember we exist to transport, to point people elsewhere: to the presence of the Father, to the saving work of Jesus, to the consolation of the Spirit – until such time as we are all encompassed by that Kingdom that has no end, where

⁴⁴ See *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*.

⁴⁵ Tom Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars* (Alban 2001), 11.

there is no need for sacrament because we can enjoy the presence of God in perfect and unbroken communion, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”⁴⁶

On a personal note, I would like to add that I am no Luddite. I am an active social media junkie, and daily maintain a Facebook page for my church. I know full well the valuable community that can and does exist through the internet. Moreover, I am not an ardent traditionalist when it comes to worship. I’ve felt God’s presence in contemporary worship with a drum set and expensive light setup, in an Orthodox vespers service with icons and incense, and in stripped-down mission camp worship with nothing but stars and guitars. This isn’t, for me, a question of style, but of substance.

Nearly everything that church does can be replicated online with little to nothing lost. The sacraments, however, are a bridge too far, and an exception to this rule. I sincerely pray that another way can be found for Central Online to live out its call to offer the Eucharis to God’s people. In the not-so-distant future, it may well be that what people need to experience the holy Otherness of God is a retreat from the digital life, a relief from the community-at-arms-length that the internet offers. Increasingly, the 21st century West is a world drowning in technology, in screens and pixels and i-everything, in what we might call “form of relationship without the power.” The church should be wary of throwing more water on drowning people. What has been often said in regards to preaching is also true for the sacraments: technology is a useful servant, but a poor master.

⁴⁶ The image of the airport is from Reggie McNeal’s *Missional Renaissance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2009).

Addendum

A reply from the EWTN “Assistant Theologian” re: the visitation of the sick and homebound with the consecrated elements and their understanding of the spiritual benefit of viewing the Mass, via personal correspondence:

“When the bread and wine are consecrated to become the Body and Blood of Christ, the church wishes for there to be an approximation of the number of Hosts for the number of expected communicants, but there are often – intentionally – several left for the express purpose of taking to the sick, home-bound, nursing home resident, etc. In most cases, the consecrated Hosts are taken directly from the chapel to the recipients, as soon as is practical. In cases where a person is known to the local pastor to be in need of ongoing and regular Communion in the home or hospital, the visitation can often be arranged so that the Sacred Species is taken to the recipient within hours of the Consecration. It is never to be kept in the home of the person who is delivering it, for more than a 24 hour period at maximum.

As for the viewing of the Mass at home, the church teaches us two distinct things (the question having first arisen in the earliest days of radio, at which time a decidedly more religious nation found spiritual sustenance to be one of the first uses for that new medium).

First, if one is viewing (or hearing) the celebration of the Mass as it is broadcast live, then the blessing of the priest (including that of the Pope) is bestowed upon the viewer exactly as it would be if he or she were personally present. If the viewer is observing a

recording of the liturgy, there are still graces and blessings received but it is not the same as being physically present when the blessing is given.

Second – although one obviously does not receive the same benefit and blessing that one receives when physically consuming the Sacred Species, even so, making a ‘*Spiritual Communion*’ while viewing or hearing the Mass – whether live or recorded – is assured, by the church, to bring abundant graces and blessings to a devout soul. In fact, a number of the Saints of centuries gone by, attributed their growth in the spiritual life to making frequent Spiritual Communions. We recall that in those days, unless one was fortunate enough to live within easy walking distance of a church or chapel, it was not common to frequently receive Communion from the priest, and many people worked in rural areas in which work was required of them from morning til night, six or seven days a week. So attending the Mass was perhaps only possible once a week for many, yet the Spiritual Communion, in addition to one’s regular daily prayers, would help one to draw ever closer to Our Lord.

(As a side note, this was also one of the reasons that the Angelus became a part of the daily prayer life of so many people in rural / agrarian areas; even though the worker could not take time out to visit a chapel during the work day, when he or she would cease work for the midday meal, the sound of the Angelus bells would help them to feel ‘connected’ to other Christians, as they took a moment to kneel and offer their prayers, in union with all of the church, in the middle of the work day.)

Hope this is helpful, and that it addresses the questions asked.”

Update

When asked for clarification about certain elements of the above statement, particularly the nature of the “blessing” that is understood to extend to the viewing audience, the EWTN Assistant Theologian sent the following response:

“Oh, certainly. It is *not* the *Consecration*, which is the prayer over the Eucharistic Elements at the time of the Transubstantiation; the blessing of benediction is the priestly blessing in which the priest, acting as the servant of God and the servant of the people, extends the prayer for God’s blessing to those who participate locally, or those who participate from a distance, spiritually, while watching or listening. In other words, it is the same priestly blessing of the people that one would receive if one were sitting physically present on a pew during the liturgy.

Hope this helps.”

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