A Wesleyan Perspective on Online Communion

Sarah Lancaster

**Principle:** The Lord’s Supper is not only a means of grace, but it is also a sacrament that is central to what it means to be church. By claiming to be fully church, The United Methodist Church takes on responsibility for maintaining the due administration of the Lord’s Supper.

**Background:** Although he does speak of the Lord’s Supper as if it “conveys” grace like a substance, Wesley more typically and more consistently speaks of grace as God’s own activity, God’s power and presence.¹ To think of the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace according to this better account of Wesley’s understanding of grace, we must think of the Lord’s Supper not as a conveyance system but as an opportunity to encounter and respond to the loving power and presence of God.

God has recourse to using many different kinds of means for opportunities for encounter, so reflection about the Lord’s Supper as a means of grace must concentrate on the kind of opportunity for encounter it provides. As a sacrament, the Lord’s Supper not only points to but also participates in the reality it conveys. Although this reality is multifaceted, it includes communion with God and with the church universal. The *ekklesia* is a gathering, and gathering is an essential element of the sign-act of the Lord’s Supper. As the church’s primary sign of communion with God and with each other in the body of Christ, the Lord’s Supper points to the reality of communion so we may participate in it. It is not only the bread and cup that do so, but also the gathering itself. As a sacrament, the Lord’s Supper is recognized in our Articles of Religion as one of the marks of the visible church. The church is charged with its due administration.

*This Holy Mystery* recognizes the importance of gathering for the Lord’s Supper. It gives special instruction about how to extend the Table to those who are unable to gather in person. It disallows “drop in” and “self-service” communion because there is no gathering.

John Wesley made clear for other circumstances the high value of being in person with one another. He takes up the reasons for actual visitation and not just sending aid to those who are ill in Sermon 98 “On Visiting the Sick.” Seeing one another face to face is essential in Wesley’s view for our ongoing sanctification because seeing each other in person (and in the Lord’s Supper, sharing the Table) opens our hearts to real people in a way that doing something from a distance cannot.

The communion to which the Lord’s Supper points is not only a personal relationship with God, but also our relationship with one another in Christ. The Lord’s Supper has been given to the whole church, but its celebration has been at times unifying and at times divisive of the body. It has often been divisive when churches do not recognize its due administration in each other’s

¹ Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 120.
practice. If The United Methodist Church wants to claim and honor its place in the universal church, it must administer this sacrament with full attention to the whole church.

**Practice:** If online communion is intended to be a way of extending the Table, it should be governed by the instructions in *This Holy Mystery*. “Drop in” online communion does not involve the gathering that is a necessary part of the sign-act.

Because seeing each other face-to-face is a high value in our Wesleyan heritage, even streaming online communion may not adequately represent the gathering it should. It is far better for the needs of those who are unable to attend to be taken care of through visitation.

To be considered fully church by other churches, and even to conform to our own standard for what a church is, the Lord’s Supper must be duly administered. The practice of online communion is not simply ours to decide. Because of the potentially damaging effects to the communion it is supposed to represent, innovation in this area should be considered only in consultation with the whole body of Christ.

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