

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING THE PRACTICE OF EUCHARIST IN CYBERSPACE¹

Dr. Janice L. Duce, Davison, Michigan

There is continuous proliferation and pervasiveness of the Internet in today's culture. One of the areas of growth is online religion, with experimentations of various kinds of religious practice occurring with an accompanying spectrum of attitudes toward these developments ranging from euphoria to consternation. Theologians and religious scholars who wish to remain on the cutting edge of engagement with the current culture need to find ways to constructively dialog with these kinds of new developments in everyday life. At the very least this should include being conversant with the continuous changes that both transform and yet maintain religious community life. In this essay, the specific major issue will be whether or not the Internet is an appropriate type of space for ritual such as the Eucharist for The Church of the Nazarene. As this ritual is one of the central practices for the life and worship of the Church, considering the legitimacy of the practice in cyberspace² demonstrates the extent to which the Church is willing to consider the legitimacy of cyberspace as a location for religious life. In the following it will be suggested that for the Church of the Nazarene, a nuanced Wesleyan/holiness understanding of the Eucharist may in fact be compatible with a meaningful observance of Holy Communion in cyberspace.

The extent of the use of digital media for ministry is a significant discussion for some other Churches. Within the larger discussion there has been some dialogue about the observance of Holy Communion online. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore to any extent the predilection of other Churches, it is significant to note in passing that although at least two other sectors in the Christian church at large have been favorably disposed toward innovative use of digital media for ministry, they have at the same time, been disposed toward drawing the line when it comes to Holy Communion. Roman Catholic theologian, Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, who has researched the stance of the Church since The Second Vatican council on social communication in general, reflects the openness of the Church toward the use of the Internet when she writes that the "potential for being present through the digital media to those in and outside of the Church is exciting territory, inviting more and more explorations from those in ministry." Yet, she also points out that in a 2005 apostolic letter, Pope John Paul II, although acknowledging the need for the Church to recognize social communication found in the digital age as both a "tool and a new culture" insists that when it comes to the observance of the Sacrament, there is a "culmination moment in which communication becomes full communion:

¹ Based on the author's doctoral dissertation: "A Theological Inquiry Regarding The Practice of the Eucharist In Cyberspace" (PhD diss., the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology Joint PhD Program, 2013).

² The term "cyberspace" is recognized by literature surrounding the development of the Internet as being pioneered by science fiction author William Gibson. It refers to a computer generated world that has captured the imagination of those in computer technology. See William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), Jeffrey P. Zaleski, *The Soul of Cyberspace: How Technology Is Changing Our Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), et al.

the Eucharistic encounter,” thus drawing a line of limiting the practice to an onground³ observance. He writes further that the “Eucharistic encounter” in which “Word and sacrament communicate Christ’s presence,” invites the Church to a communal encounter to “physically receive as sacrament that which has been proclaimed as Word.”⁴ In closer proximity to the Wesleyan theology of the Church of the Nazarene, The United Methodist Church convened a formal conversation in 2013 centered on the practice of online Eucharist. The 27 participants included pastors (3 of whom had led or were planning to lead online Eucharist), bishops, denominational personnel and theologians. The group did not reach a decisive conclusion but broadly agreed that the official teaching document adopted by the General Conference in 2004, “does not support practice of online communion.” Concern was also expressed that approval by Bishops or General conference would “endanger our intercommunion agreements with our ecumenical partners.” The group called upon the Bishops to “with urgency, exercise their ordering and teaching responsibilities to lead the UMC on this issue.” It recommended that the Council of Bishops call for a moratorium of the practice, while at the same time the notes and papers from this formal discussion be referred to the Council of Bishops and the Committee on Faith and Order for “further conversation” within the UMC and with its ecumenical partners.⁵

A study of Eucharist in cyberspace related to implications for the Church of the Nazarene was done beginning with a case study of a Nazarene group who met with controversy after they shared the ritual in cyberspace. Based on a qualitative case study of the practice and its aftermath, a theoretical analysis was done that included the nature of the Internet itself and its capacity as a location for a religious user community interested in preserving their Eucharistic theological tradition. The study centered around two aspects. First a narrative of the practice by a group of Nazarene college students lead by an ordained faculty member.⁶ The case study outlined and analyzed the event itself, including examination of the transcript of the observance and interviews with participants. The second aspect was an analysis of an extensive email conversation of Wesleyan scholars in response to an article about it in Nazarene Communication Network News. The latter conversation included a cross section of various scholars from the Church of the Nazarene. Although most were cautiously positive about the possibilities of ministry using the Internet in general, not one of the 26 participants in the discussion gave their unqualified approval of observing the Lord’s Supper in cyberspace.⁷

The pivotal question is: How does a religious community negotiate innovative practice with a religious tradition that they wish to maintain? Here it will be shown that a Wesleyan/holiness

³ The term “onground,” synonymous with “offline,” will be used in this essay to refer to that which is opposite of being “online.” The latter is the act of using a computer network, commonly referred to as the Internet. See David Bell, Brian D. Loader, Nicolas Pleace, and Douglas Schuler, eds. “Online,” in *Cyberculture: The Key Concepts*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 147.

⁴ Daniella Zsupan-Jerome, *Connection Toward Communion: The Church and Social Communication in the Digital Age* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 1, 109.

⁵ L. Edward Phillips, “Online Communion Conversation: Sept.30-Oct.1, 2013, Nashville Tennessee” <http://umcmedia.org/umcorg/2013/communion/online-communion-conversation.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2015).

⁶ Nazarene Communications Network, “Breaking Bread-Breaking Ground: NBC Students Share Communion Online,” <http://www.ncnnews.com/nphweb/html/ncn/article> (accessed September 11, 2010).

⁷ Janice L. Duce, “A Theological Inquiry,” 112.

theology of the Eucharist can be creatively “redeployed” for a fitting online observance of this sacrament.⁸ The strategy suggested here is what could be called a “discursive framing process,” in which a Nazarene community in cyberspace configures a unique adaptation of tradition to a new situation.⁹ The scope of this essay is to provide a description of the nature of cyberspace such that particular theological criteria for a legitimate practice of the Eucharist can be satisfied. Here, preliminary concerns about its legitimacy can be met by maintaining the following: 1) Cyberspace can actually feature the communal aspect of Eucharist; and, 2) Cyberspace can truly support a substantive observance of this Sacrament.

Cyberspace Can Feature the Communal Aspect of the Eucharist

The concept of community in cyberspace is unique, yet similar to contemporary understandings of community. The most crucial point is that community in society today has become more and more about *networked connections*, surrounding shared interests, and less about physical proximity. Further, this fact need not create a “quandary” so that people have to choose between “onground” and “online.” Instead, there is an emergent blurring of ties created and sustained onground and/or online. There is evidence that shows that involvement ranging from personal connection to political activism can originate and be bolstered by ties in cyberspace. Cyberspace is not an inherently anti-communal enterprise. However, often a nostalgic view of community continues to promote prejudice against the kind of ties that in fact are forged by virtual network connections. Experience with the internet, reflected in research,¹⁰ has found that involvement consonant with community need not abandon personal identity, because these cannot ever be completely left behind if one’s anthropology is truly holistic.

Thus virtual networks need not attenuate the essential aspects of an authentically engaged community. In the case study cited above, an actual networked community of an online Spiritual Formation class of ministerial students at a Nazarene institution, sensed a communal connection so strong that it prompted a desire among the students to engage together in the Lord’s Supper. The result was that this very act bolstered and strengthened the religious communal life for the participants. The nature of the networked connection via the Internet was also found to intensify, in an unprecedented way, the experience of the communicants that they are sharing with a vast worldwide community of faith presently as well as historically. The realization of networked connection across time zones and cultures brought about a satisfying sense that indeed in the Eucharist there are no barriers between ourselves and others and that Christ unites all even in cyberspace. This class was not alone in this discovery and indeed other examples can be found.¹¹

Historical precedence in the Church of the Nazarene vis-à-vis technology and the Internet has leaned toward innovation. But when it comes to the Eucharist, how “high” or “low” one’s view of the Eucharist has yet to be clarified. In the case noted above, at least as far as the

⁸ The author is using a phrase taken from Kathryn Tanner. See Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), ix.

⁹ See Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 134.

¹⁰ See Janice L. Duce, “A Theological Inquiry.”

¹¹ Janice L. Duce, “A Theological Inquiry,” chapters 2-4. This analysis included the experience as well as perspectives from two United Methodist pastors who have facilitated an online observance of the Lord’s Supper.

understanding of the Nazarene participants were concerned, they would not necessarily be classified as having a low view of the Eucharist. Additionally, they thought in terms of both the universal as well as a type of local sense of community in their understanding of the Church. For this group, the spiritually connected community as networked, necessitated an interactive experience in a social location. Cyberspace facilitates intimacy and fellowship as none can engage passively, but all must make their presence known as fully present to others as active participants. Such core values of high participation that networked connection can afford, affects an interest in making the sacrament accessible to anyone using creative means. Surely the latter notion is not foreign to Wesleyan sensibilities.

The experience examined in the case study showed that the professor and the class who participated in online Eucharist were redeploying their essential understanding of Eucharist in cyberspace through a strategy of reconfiguring and innovating to fit this venue. Reconfiguring and innovating is a negotiation strategy that is the middle ground between either rejecting and resisting innovation, or simply appropriating in a non-scrupulous manner a traditional practice to a new venue. When care is taken to reconfigure, attention is given to see to it that the use of the technology conforms to the “values of the community.”¹² That is, the values of the faith community as a whole are the guidelines for the way that the particular networked community formats the technology to engage in the experience. In the aspect of the case study that examined the reactions to the Nazarene observance of Eucharist in cyberspace, opinions that opposed it tended to run along the lines of resist and reject. In the opinions of others who were uncomfortable with what occurred, if there was any inclination toward the middle ground of reconfigure and innovate, it was attached to an assumption that most likely only a group with a very shallow view of community would attempt the practice.

Cyberspace Can Support A Substantive Observance of the Eucharist

The notion that cyberspace can support a substantive observance requires an understanding of the nature of the Internet itself as a communication medium that can function as a true setting/location, according to the manner in which the medium is designed as a ritual space. Additionally, on the part of a user community, the importance of the material aspect of the traditional mode of practice, can be maintained by utilizing some aesthetic strategies that employ the physical senses. The latter serves to highlight the significance of materiality, establishing the practice in cyberspace as substantive.

The Internet as a communication medium can be understood in light of two views of communication: transmission and ritual views. The transmission view has to do with the tradition in communication theory that communication is about the effective and accurate carrying of information from one place to another, and from one person to another.¹³ The transmission view also promotes such notions as the *noosphere*,¹⁴ in which cyberspace is

¹² Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media*, 113.

¹³ Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis, *Mass Communication Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), 212-13.

¹⁴ The term is used here in the sense originated with Teilhard, referring to the belief in the emergence of a worldwide computational brain in which there is an ever evolving global consciousness formed out of the kinds of interactions that results in the connection of minds that result in a powerful unified universal

stretched to an extreme of the uniting of minds. In contrast, the other view, that of the ritual view of communication, sees communication as a place that does not disregard the reality of difference and distance, and yet sees communication as a venue of ritual and the creation of shared life.¹⁵ Perhaps a bias toward the notion of communication as transmission either attenuates what one deems as possible within a communication medium, or as in the case of a *noosphere*, presses one toward either fearing or embracing an extreme view of communication.

Drawing most heavily on the ritual view of communication, the Internet can be seen as a medium adequate to host the Eucharist, because the rite itself is mediation. Communication theorist, John Durham Peters,¹⁶ has been especially helpful as his take on communication pulls one back from the burden of transmission communication, and opens the door to recognizing that the medium could promote a sound, balanced view of communication that avoids the extremes of criteria for connection that no medium can achieve. Peters, problematizes the dominance of the quest for perfection in dialog, showing that an over-emphasis on perfecting dialog is not necessarily the goal of communication. Additionally, his view of dissemination makes the point that the Internet can be exactly the medium that opens the door to new possibilities of empowerment through the concept of communication as dissemination. This concept affirms otherness and the boundary of control maintained by embodiment. In this view, true communication does not mean removing a perceived “barrier” of bodies so that minds can be merged. Instead, otherness is maintained and cherished according to an approach of communication media that champions otherness while seeking meaningful and authentic connection between users. So, a ritual view of communication helps to establish that cyberspace as a communication medium is concerned with more than “transmitting well.” The ritual view stresses sharing, participation, fellowship and commonality. This view thinks of communication in terms of culture. Applying this idea, characterizes cyberspace as culture. Culture that has to do with community development and sharing, shaped by the individual user interacting with a user community.

Building on the ritual view of communication mediation, a construal of the theorist Gregor Goethals¹⁷ suggests that media is compatible with religious ritual as the user community utilizes shared symbols to make for a substantive ritual practice. That which is substantive is that which invokes materiality and requires the use of the senses beyond the transmission of information. When communication medium as a ritual space is put together with aesthetic sensitivity, involving ways in which materiality of the symbols are maintained, a “picture “of cyberspace as a location that fulfills the need for the Eucharist to be a ritual with substantive characteristics emerges.

consciousness. Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2004), 350.

¹⁵ James W. Carey, *Communication As Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2000), under “Chapter 1: A Cultural Approach to Communication,” <http://www3.niuedu/acad/gunkel/corns-465/carey/html> (accessed May 28, 2010), e-book, 4.

¹⁶ See John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into The Air: A History of The Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Gregor Goethals, “Myth And Ritual in Cyberspace,” in *Mediating Religion: Conversations in Media, Religion And Culture*, ed. Jolyon Mitchell and Sophia Marriage, 257-269 (London: T&T Clark, 2003).

Conscientious methodology is crucial to making sure that all of the essential theological and liturgical aspects of what should take place in the observance of the Lord's Supper is done when it is observed in cyberspace.¹⁸ In the case of the observance by the Nazarene class,¹⁹ all five senses were engaged in the experience of partaking of the Eucharist online. Each participant was logged into a chat room and had a physical cup of juice and piece of bread. They also were to view a picture together of a loaf of bread and chalice. When all were present in a chat room, they were instructed to be sure that they each had a physical cup of grape juice and a piece of bread in front of them where they were seated. The professor, an ordained minister in the Church of the Nazarene, along with his class, used together an audio mp3 recording found at a Christian church website that had posted a Holy Communion service online. When everyone indicated that they were ready and had all the materials, they clicked on the mp3 file, and following a Word file that they each had of a song, which they sang together with the mp3 recording. Although the students couldn't hear each other, they could see by the typing in the chat room that their classmates were present, singing along. The transcript of the experience shows that they began typing to the chat room expressions of praise and indications that they were worshipping, one saying that she was raising her hands in praise. The recording also included Scripture reading, a homily about the Lord's Supper, prayer, and then words of consecration of the bread and juice. The recording has the words: "Let us serve each other and remember our Lord." Then the professor typed to the students that they would begin serving one another with more typed instructions that the professor would serve the first person on the chatroom list (the list is a visible indication of who is present). When a student saw themselves addressed on the chat screen, and were told that they were receiving the cup or the bread, they were to type an acknowledgment that they were receiving the element, and at this point would be partaking of the bread or juice at their station. The most meaningful aspect was that each participant was not only to acknowledge receipt and partaking of the emblems, but were to augment their partaking by typing a response in the form of a prayer, offering praise and thanksgiving to Christ. Then they were to offer it to the next person on the list. Another aspect that enriched the service, was that students did not simply say that they were passing along an emblem. They incorporated words of a personal nature to the next student, offering beautiful expressions of what Christ had done for them. After everyone had been served, students continued typing exuberant words of praise not only to Christ, but words of how exhilarating it was to realize that they were sharing together. The professor ended things with a benediction, and logged out of the chatroom.

Some of the criticism of the Nazarene experiment, involved the charge that Eucharist in cyberspace must surely be yet another manifestation of the ancient heresy, "Gnosticism."²⁰

¹⁸ More detail of an example and rationale of how this has been done in the Church of the Nazarene and in the United Methodist Church are available in the author's dissertation. Also available are links to three Pdf background papers presented for the conversation on the issue for the UMC. See: Dawn Chesser, "Exploring Holy Communion Online;" Gregory S. Neal, "Holy Communion Over the Internet: Reflections on an Experiment In Sacramental Practice;" Andy Langford, "Offer Them Christ: Celebrating the Eucharist." www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-united-methodist-view-of-communion (Accessed April 29, 2015).

¹⁹ See Janice L. Duce, "A Theological Inquiry," chapter 3. I, an ordained elder in the Church of the Nazarene, also conducted the Sacrament with an online group, using the same methods described here by the original experiment done by the class at a Nazarene college.

²⁰ Janice L. Duce, "A Theological Inquiry," chapters 1, 4.

Attaching such a label has been based on the assumption that such observances in cyberspace can do nothing but privilege the spiritual over the material world. Further, some would see that the Eucharist by its very nature in using material, physical elements ensures the affirmation of the creation of the material world. This would necessitate to them the need for an onground gathered community in this venue holding in their hands together consecrated bread and juice/wine. To do it any other way emasculates a sacrament that should decisively promote the material world, and a bodily, atoning death of the Savior of the world, for the world.

In response, it can be shown that the term “Gnosticism” itself and the concepts attached to it have been contested by recent scholarship.²¹ Thus, it cannot be used as a reliable tool for critique in order to identify, control, and curtail innovation such as a creative redeployment of Eucharist theology and practice. Evaluating the Eucharist in cyberspace is not best served by trying to squelch it with worn out dubious discursive contentions. At the very least, a more constructive conversation would be possible if such unhelpful charges could be replaced by looking at cyberspace culturally, regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the venue as a ritual space informed by theological aesthetics and recent religion and media studies.

*Particular Theological Considerations for Cyberspace Being A Communication Medium of Christ's Presence*²²

Here it is suggested that there is good reason for the Wesleyan/holiness view of the Eucharist to be compatible with a legitimate practice of it in cyberspace when it is regarded as a communication medium of grace that joins a networked community together in a sacramental encounter with Christ.²³ Compatibility is based on the view of the manner of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The Eucharist, itself a medium, exemplifies both transmission and ritual communication qualities, regarding the presence of Christ. It has been argued above that the transmission view is not the best outlook for a robust view of communication to support a substantive view for Eucharist in cyberspace. Yet the transmission of a message in the sacramental moment is part of what occurs in the event. This moment conveys a message in the action of bringing the distant God near, making the truth about the cross clear to communicants. The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is visible word, such that it conveys this meaning in the partaking of the bread and the cup. As visible words, the action of actually handling the symbols impresses upon the communicants the truth of what they have been taught. The ritual understanding of communication intensifies the sense of communion in which the meaning is experienced in the use of the symbols as the presence of Christ is conveyed by the Holy Spirit. Material symbols connect the communicant to a spiritual reality of fellowship with Christ through the Holy Spirit. The communicant is lifted up to Christ in a way that not only facilitates

²¹ Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003) and Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism: An Argument For Dismantling A Dubious Category"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), et al.

²² See an extensive discussion and development of the concepts in this section in Janice L. Duce, “A Theological Inquiry,” chapter 5.

²³ Although as Rob T. Staples points out, Wesley speaks of Christ's presence in terms of his divinity and less in terms of “power mediated by the Holy Spirit,” so that the whole Trinity is present, “bestowing the benefits of Christ's redemptive act.” Rob T. Staples, *Outward Sign And Inward Grace: The Place of The Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1991), 226-227.

fellowship with Christ, but the spiritual dimension of religious piety is catalyzed. The type of encounter here described need not be attenuated because it happens online. As long as intentional engagement in cyberspace highlights the death of Christ there should not be any reasonable objection as to why the Holy Spirit would not convey this truth through a creative adaptation of engagement with symbols.

The spiritual presence of Christ in the Eucharist as real presence should not be overlooked in theological considerations from a Wesleyan/holiness perspective of the Eucharist in cyberspace. Wesley's view of the Eucharist has been considered by some to be harmonious with Calvin's view of real presence. Others think that Wesley's view should be culled exclusively from Wesley's own writings and the unique contributions of his Anglican background.²⁴ Regarding Wesley and the issue of Christ's presence, Lorna Khoo, makes an insightful point that there is reason to view Wesley as unique in his "sideways" movement in the Eucharist of the connection of the communicant to Christ and his sacrificial death in the memorial celebration of the death of Christ. She shows that in the *Hymns of the Lord's Supper*, more than one of the hymns alludes to a blinding veil that is removed so that the communicant can see Calvary before them. Within this she criticizes Calvin's style of spiritual emphasis of the Eucharist as lacking compared to Wesley's because it focuses on a lofty spiritual giftedness of the sacrifice with a "lack of physicality and a somewhat detached approach" that "could affect the communicant's attitude towards the physical world, the self and God." She also writes that the "post-Cranmer Anglican theologians with their bold linking of Christ's presence to consecrated elements" contributes a "sense of divine immanence and warmth" and to the "affirmation of the physicality of created things." Therefore in her view, an emphasis on the lofty, spiritual presence of Christ, that a Calvinist view affords, might take the emphasis off of a warm personal presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the physical world. She writes that the Wesleys reflect a "very warm, personal and intimate understanding of Christ's eucharistic [sic] presence in the eucharistic service."²⁵

Certainly attention to Wesley's unique understanding of presence in the Supper should be an emphasis for those in the Wesleyan/holiness perspective in the Church of the Nazarene.²⁶ However, what follows this emphasis of Khoo and others is a preference for an emphasis on the inward/outward dichotomy rather than an upward/downward with accompanying spiritual/material dichotomies. Such thinking therefore maintains that attention to Wesley's "outward sign of an inward grace," puts the emphasis on the role that material symbols play in inward confirmation of the Spirit's presence. Brent Peterson, in keeping with the outward confirming the inward has developed an understanding of the presence of Christ as "doxological agnosticism."²⁷ His arguments about the need for this emphasis is well taken and applauded. It works to undergird all at once the wonder of the encounter with Christ in the Eucharist in

²⁴ It is beyond the scope of this essay to sort out the exact meaning and source of Wesley's view of presence.

²⁵ Lorna Khoo, *Wesleyan Eucharistic Spirituality: Its Nature, Sources, and Future* (Hindmarsh, SA: AFT Press, 2005), 134-135, 161.

²⁶ Although Khoo's point is well taken, the author takes issue with a bias that Calvin's view of Christ with His church in the Eucharistic moment lacks personal warmth and intimacy.

²⁷ See Brent David Peterson, "A post-Wesleyan Eucharistic ecclesiology: The renewal of the church as the body of Christ to be doxologically broken and spilled out for the world" (PhD diss., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, 2009).

worshipful doxological rapture, without the need to try to explain the unexplainable, especially with regard to messy metaphysical entanglements. However, going to such lengths to guard against such entanglements and uplifting the material, while certainly a helpful corrective in many respects, can also create a new problem of downplaying too readily the necessity of an emphasis on a spiritually present Christ. Some aspect of Calvin's concept of real presence as spiritual presence might help to keep intact a spiritual component of the Eucharist without muting Wesley's contribution. The latter must certainly remain central, although complementary insight from Calvin need not be eliminated. The latter provides a robust view of the *virtus* of Christ²⁸ for an online networked community to join others in a sacramental encounter with Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. This can be maintained with a "sacramental vision"²⁹ that does not truncate the material engagement with symbols online, bolstered by a theologically informed, aesthetically adduced practice in cyberspace.

Conclusion

In November, 2014, at the Academy of American Religion in San Diego, I sat in a crowded session of a Wesley Group presentation of papers including some good work being done on the Eucharist. The moderator, during the discussion/Q & A time for the presentations made a sarcastic comment in passing about online Eucharist. The comment was met with approving scoffs and chuckles by that august gathering. As I sat there and fumed, I wondered again why such sentiments continue to dominate among those who will engage seriously the scientific community for conversations about the relationship with science and theology, or dig into the social sciences and psychology et.al. for insights regarding conversations about human sexuality and theology, but will ignore understandings that can be gained from media and religious studies and communication theory for theology and technology. Rather than dubbing practices such as Eucharist in cyberspace as cheap, shallow, or capitulation to pragmatism, why not take seriously the experiments that are being done that are trying to offer Christ to people in as many ways as possible?

In this essay there were two major theoretical considerations that I dealt with to establish my thesis. The first was that the nature of the Internet demonstrates a capacity to operate as a venue for religious ritual. The second was that the nature of the Eucharist itself is compatible with formatting the ritual to this venue so that it is possible for a faith community that is interested in combining a highly prized tradition with innovation to do so. I hope to see dialog about theology and new media open up in fecund ways.

I believe that attention needs to be given to the fact that communication media such as the Internet should be critiqued, without being dismissed, by theological discourse. Moreover, a cultural approach to communication media such as the Internet should critique and transform discourse surrounding it. I contend that too often negative bias toward change, and refusal to be open to new frontiers of theological understandings, can cause theologians to make negative assumptions about innovation. My exploration and conclusions about at least one example of a Nazarene institution that engaged in Eucharist in cyberspace, as well as my own experimentation

²⁸ John Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Lord's Supper" in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Vol. 2, Tracts, Part 2, ed. and trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 173-174.

²⁹ See Rob T. Staples, *Outward Sign And Inward Grace*, 65n.9.

with celebrating it online, provides insight into the nature of cyberspace religious community and practice, particularly with regard to ritual. It has been my desire to affirm the emergence of new horizons of theological and religious practice in postmodern life.

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