Failure to Discern the Online/Hybrid Body: A Captivity of the Eucharist

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Introduction

I became aware of the church's failure to discern the online/hybrid body in the weeks of dialogue prompted by a *New York Times* Opinion piece on "Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services."[1] In the essay, Tish Harrison Warren leans into a familiar argument for those of us who research technoculture and the debates about whether online presence and engagement are "real" or "embodied" or "only virtual."

> "For all of us — even those who aren't churchgoers — bodies, with all the risk, danger, limits, mortality and vulnerability that they bring, are part of our deepest humanity, not obstacles to be transcended through digitization. They are humble (and humbling) gifts to be embraced. Online church, while it was necessary for a season, diminishes worship and us as people. We seek to worship wholly — with heart, soul, mind and strength — and embodiment is an irreducible part of that wholeness."

The logic that all online gatherings are efforts to transcend our bodies is problematic. Of course, transcendence through online activity may be the case for an extreme minority of technophiliacs. More troubling, however, is Warren's implicit bias toward the desires and capacities of able bodies for whom physically gathering in a building for worship comes at low or no cost. The implied "we" of Warren's essay are abled bodies, as she argues "we" think it is best for "you all" choosing to stay home for worship to get over here again. It also sounds a lot like arguments that held the full sacrament of Eucharist in both kinds captive from most people in Martin Luther's day—*we, the clergy, think it is best for you, the lay people, to only partake of the bread or nothing at all at the risk of doing so unworthily.*[2]

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Before March 2020, people worshiped online or through hybrid means. This pre-pandemic online religious assembly was often those marginalized by conventional church and worship. This may have been due to physical disability, chronic illness, or people advanced in years without the capacity to easily get their bodies into the sanctuary for worship. Others reached out online for religious belonging because the only church within driving distance would cast them out for who they love or their gender identity. Another cluster of connection is the neuro-divergent religious who cannot participate with their action and intelligence because the "we" of the liturgy is folks with a different neurological orientation. So, when churches closed their doors in March 2020, a great assembly of Christians, entered space already occupied by the marginalized.

So, when a pastor argues for shutting down online and/or hybrid worship as vaccinations increase and transmission rates decrease, they fail to discern the body of Christians for whom online and/or hybrid assembly is not merely more convenient but necessary for communal worship to take place at all. In response to Warren's essay, Diana Butler Bass speaks to the holy gatherings that did indeed occur during the pandemic through platforms like Zoom. She challenges the narrow definition of embodiment that

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1. Tish Harrison Warren. "Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services." *The New York Times Opinion.* January 30, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html?smid=url-share&fbclid=IwAR1xJPkV5YS2rQXtmyJWO0BNvkBlfVF_QNDwVlORx_cuEL8E_apOGn-bsTU (accessed September 9, 2022).
2. Martin Luther. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *The Annotated Luther: Church and Sacraments, Vol. 3.* Paul W. Robinson, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 29-30.

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Warren and others articulate, saying, "Embodiment doesn't just mean living flesh in a particular place…embodiment in a robust understanding extends from skin-and-bones particularity to the larger shape of things as a whole."[3]

These debates are personal and particular to my skin-and-bones embodiment. I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disease in 2016. When my body is in a storm state of the disease, walking, thinking, and remaining awake are obstacles that require me to stay in bed, even on a Sunday. Additionally, gluten is one of the main contributors to the disease waking from its slumber in my body and going into a storm state. Rigid rules around the ingredients of the Eucharist have held the supper in captivity for me for many years because churches refuse to accommodate my disease and insist that a small amount will not cause harm. No amount of prayer removes the gluten that deteriorates my physical wellness and the assumption that it can is another failure to discern the body.

Those of us choosing to remain home and join online are not merely doing so out of what the essayist calls a "consumer preference." These choices are a matter of physical, social, and spiritual well-being. The *Times* essayist's assumption that all bodies of our neighbors can worship wholly in a building is erroneous and harmful to the high-risk, immunocompromised, neuro-divergent, disabled, and excluded bodies in our communion.

We need a more holistic sacramental theology that discerns the body of Christ in all our complexity and vulnerability. We do not need to narrow our understanding into the confines of the dualistic schema that pits the in-person against the person online. Emerging technologies empower the church to gather a communion once fragmented in wholly holy and novel ways. Yet it is essential to approach the possibilities from theological tradition to root changes in practice in more than the novelty of the latest technological fad. Technological changes also offer new possibilities for accessibility justice, as they did for past generations of worshipers, such as pasteurization and the production of unfermented grape juice. This is one example of a shift that made it safer for people struggling with alcohol addiction to participate in the sacrament. How might technological advancements today invite the church to include more people at the table?

Confronting a myth of disembodiment online

Warren's essay exemplifies a reoccurring technocultural stumbling block in the online communion debate: a failure to discern notions of presence and embodiment in this digital age. As mentioned earlier, there is a tendency to approach technological change and its emerging technoculture from one of two sides. One side of the pole is technological determinism or technophobia. Unfortunately, here is where the church most often plants itself. Technophobia is the posture of Nicholas Carr and others. They see an inevitable future wherein our machines will overpower humanity, dehumanize us, program us in a machinelike fashion, and erase our species from the planet. On the other side is technological embrace, or technophilia. This is the worship of technological development as if it is a tool for humanity to become perfect humanity. At its extremes, this approach assumes that we will eventually conquer death and the limits of our biological bodies with our intelligent technologies. Neither of these poles is a generative starting place for us as we think about how to discern a way forward for the Eucharist on online and hybrid platforms. As best as we can, we should find a centering space through curiosity and resist falling into a dualistic schema.

But first, we must get beyond the bin(d)nary thinking implicit in Western Christian theology. According to ecofeminist process theologian Anna Case-Winters, the original binary in Western Christian theology is the "God-world" binary, which removes God from creation, setting God up as its distant ruler. The "God-world" binary simultaneously desacralizes nature. The binaries that follow this original pair set up the left side in alignment as superior and ruling over the right. For example, Case-Winters highlights this core "interconnected dualistic schema of graded differentiations:"[4]

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GOD	WORLD
MAN	WOMAN
SOUL	BODY
LIGHT	DARKNESS
GOOD	EVIL
IN-PERSON	**ONLINE**
HOLY	**PROFANE**
REAL	**FAKE**
EMBODIED	**DISEMBODIED**

Dualistic Schema Framework with Technocultural Terms Added

In this system are the seeds of the ecological crisis, which is Case-Winters' focus, but also roots for systems that perpetuate sexism, racism, and a host of other isms, including ableism and homophobia.

3. Diana Butler Bass. "The Mystical Body of Zoom: Online church is a gift to be embraced." February 2, 2022. https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/the-mystical-body-of-zoom?r=45vbf&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&fbclid=IwAR1E0ZSBSQE_FcUghIm4M416yN5KoLbi7M4oSun7hndpTQcuvim2GlkX-bs (accessed September 7, 2022).

4. Anna Case-Winters, *Reconstructing a Christian Theology of Nature* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2007), 24, 69.

What if, instead of seeing the real vs. virtual divide in terms of the dualistic schema's framework, we think about how God is with, for, and in the complex technoculture we inhabit today?

The traditional church debate fits into the dualistic schema. Approaching technoculture from the binary created by the schema, Christians may argue that virtual presence is not real presence. Instead, it is akin to the heresy of Docetism in the Body of Christ. Christians online are only apparitions of real Christians, so any gathering of this virtual body in virtual space only seems to be churchly activity. Embodiment implies incarnation, while digital or virtual implies disembodiment. As a result, embodiment implies inherently good behavior and action, while disembodiment implies inherently bad. Thus, we overlook the spectrum and nuance of best practices within digital as well as in person activity. Indeed, following this good/bad binary line of argumentation falls apart when we consider the complex reality of embodiment. Are there not many embodied actions and behaviors that run against a Christian ethic grounded by the incarnation? Rape, violence, and lying are all embodied acts that our ethical norms would deem bad. Embodiment is not sine qua non theologically aligned with the incarnation, a celebration of the whole humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ.

Juxtapositions and worship ordo: Toward meaning-full online and hybrid communion

Perpetuation of the dualistic schema is at work within one of the essential Lutheran liturgical scholars of our time, Gordon W. Lathrop. Lathrop articulated how certain juxtapositions exist in the Christian ordo that transcend time, place, tradition, and culture. Just as juxtapositions of Word/Table, the Lord's Day/Seven Days, Teaching/Baptism, Beseeching/Praise, and Pascha/The Church Year constitute the ordo, so too can a pairing of the assembly of local physical proximity and the presence-ing of believers who gather online, due to geographic distance, illness, or lack of transit, generate theological richness in the ordo. Lathrop does not leave the possibility of introducing new juxtapositions into what he proposes is the globally and historically recognized pattern of five pairs constituting the ordo.[5] But let us imagine the meaning that emerges when the assembly gathers in one place across multiple spaces through technological innovation and the power of the Holy Spirit as she renders the presence of Christ's body ubiquitous for all who assemble in faith.

Buildings are not a feature of the ordo, according to Lathrop. Rather than the space (church building) being of primary importance, gathering people—the assembly—in time and for a time centered on Word and Table is of great import. For Lathrop, spaces for worship are empty of meaning when the people who assemble for worship in the room are not present. He even cautions against embedding too much significance in worship spaces, deeming such

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behavior "nostalgia."[6]

Lathrop first articulates this theology of assembly in the time and place before COVID-19. Assembling for worship in one place at a standard time has a taken-for-granted-ness now in a pre-post-pandemic era. What might Lathrop say to the sort of nostalgia-driven captivity of the Eucharist when people stop online or hybrid worship to bring people back to the building like they used to?

In a Summer 2020 article, Lathrop speaks about the pre-vaccine reality of Lutheran worship during the pandemic, calling upon congregations to stop assembling—in buildings and online—out of love for neighbor.[7] It is, for Lathrop, better to stay home than to have a "partial" assembly without the whole body of Christ. Additionally, Lathrop explicitly critiques online and hybrid means of assembly.

> "Because of the widespread availability of electronic tools for social interaction, a variety of electronic "assembly" experiments are being made. I hope we will stop. A "virtual assembly" is not the assembly, nor is bread and wine that I set out in front of the computer screen the holy supper of the body and blood of Christ."[8]

Physical proximity then emerges in Lathrop's liturgical theology as an essential characteristic of the Christian assembly, of the Christian ordo. Physical proximity renders the assembly "real," while the electronic assembly is "virtual" or fake. Once again, guidance emerges in a dualistic schema that aligns all things physically close and space adjacent real, good, and holy. In contrast, electronic or online things are disembodied, fake, and unholy.

Many of Lathrop's arguments against online and hybrid worship do not consider how imperfection is present in our nostalgia for everyone returning to the building for worship. For example, his first argument is that "not everyone has internet

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5. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 11.

6. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 1.

7. Gordon W. Lathrop, "Thinking Again About Assembly in a Time of Pandemic." *CrossAccent.* Summer 2020, 9-17. https://alcm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/04-Thinking-Again.pdf (accessed September 16, 2022).

8. Lathrop, "Thinking Again," 14-15.

The fact is online and hybrid worship has taken place for decades. Turning our back on these novel means of worship will not stop them—ignoring online and hybrid worship practices is a failure to discern the body. But turning toward these worship assemblies with curiosity, we might be able to offer catechetical tools that improve the quality of assemblies online and hybrid, improving participation, intentionality, ritual gesture, and symbols.

access or computer skills," so online worship is an equity issue. One might ask Lathrop whether a car is more expensive or less expensive than a cell phone, which makes going online so accessible in contemporary culture. Hear voices on the margins again because of disability and the homebound inability to get into the building. Another argument against online worship blames the user at home for multi-tasking during "virtual" worship, as if such actions never occur in the conventional assembly within the four walls of a building, literally right under the presider's nose.

The seeds of this early pandemic essay's argument (that it is better not to assemble for worship at all than to assemble partially) blossomed into Lathrop's most recent book, *The Assembly: A Spirituality.*[9] In this book, Lathrop amplifies that the most critical symbol in our liturgy is the assembly of Christ's body in one room. Again, physical proximity is, for Lathrop, an essential characteristic of worship, even more so than eucharistic symbols of the altar, cup, bread, and the minister. Lathrop develops catechesis for a congregation returning to buildings in the second part of *The Assembly* that aims toward greater participation and sacramental awareness, addressing the fact that all physical assemblies situated in one building are not necessarily flawlessly worshiping God.

One certainly can read into Lathrop's critiques that online assembly is virtual and physical assembly in a building is real. But is online assembly all pretend? Fantasy? Fake? Likewise, does the physical proximity of the assembly ensure proper and authentic participation, reception, and relation of the whole body? We know the answer is 'no.'

If online and hybrid worship is in the dualistic schema into the virtual, fake, and unholy category, we are not empowered to critically reflect on ways of assembling that emerged during CO-VID-19. The fact is online and hybrid worship has taken place for decades. Turning our back on these novel means of worship will not stop them—ignoring online and hybrid worship practices is a failure to discern the body. But turning toward these worship assemblies with curiosity, we might be able to offer catechetical tools that improve the quality of assemblies online and hybrid, improving participation, intentionality, ritual gesture, and symbols.

These are questions Lutherans and Christians of all traditions must wrestle with in this digital age, in and through faith. Engaging hybrid and online means of assembling is not necessarily a declaration against assembling in person, as if this historical means of worship does not matter. Instead, engagement with hybrid and online assemblies with and for the sake of the marginalized is an invitation for the church to articulate that disabled, ill, homebound bodies and the bodies of LGBTQ siblings exiled from the nearest Christian communion also matter to God.

X-Reality: Discerning the body beyond the binary

Experiences of our technoculture resist binary thinking. Try to keep track of how many times you experience the presence of people through your phone, watch, or computer throughout your day. With every buzz and chime from your phone, you get notifications from social media. With a swipe, we respond to the presence of a friend on the other end of our technological artifacts. Then we seamlessly shift our focus to whatever else we were doing before. We do not have to sit and wait to go online and then sit for a prolonged event to log off. There is no solid line between virtual worlds and real worlds anymore.

Kathryn Reklis and other scholars of our newest media "describe this disappearing gap as X-reality—reality that moves fluidly across the virtual to real spectrum and wherein virtual or digital space is just a differently mediated way of being real."[10] That is, our whole reality is a blend of face-to-face and screen-to-screen engagement. The weave of both is really real, an embodied reality that contributes to our becoming. Reklis invites the church to shift perspective when she says, "What if, instead of seeing the real vs. virtual divide in terms of embodied vs. disembodied we think about the new permutations of digital and virtual technology informing our lives as particular ways we are embodied?"[11]

We do not live in a world where we check our bodies at the door every time we engage with social media and electronic modes of communication. The embodiment is different, but it is embodiment nonetheless. Here is an example from my life. A

9. Gordon W. Lathrop. *The Assembly: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 27.

10. Kathryn Reklis. "X-Reality and the Incarnation." *New Media Project.* (Indiana: Christian Theological Seminary, 2012). See also Beth Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011).

11. Reklis. "X-Reality and the Incarnation."

student participates in my class in planning and leading hybrid worship with classmates. The student notices they avoid entering the GoogleDocs platform to work with classmates on an upcoming service. The student spends some time discerning why it causes anxiety. During office hours with me, they explained that in a previous class, they experienced trauma in a group project that took place on GoogleDocs. That trauma still lives in their body and flares up when they enter (yes, enter) that digital space.

Many of us are almost always "online," even in person. For better or worse, this is the nature of an emerging X-reality. These connections feel like real connections to people for many reasons and redefine conceptions of neighborhood, community, and assembly. Connections "online" are not parsed out as being virtual and, therefore, less than real. The concept of X-reality, or hybrid reality resists the dualistic schema that assigns online assembly to an unholy category of fake worship and the assembly in a building as holy and real. In fact, in sociology scholars now seek to understand the sociology of community in our technoculture via "social network analysis." According to Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, "This new approach to the study of community argues that communities are in their essence social structures and not spatial or geographic structures such as neighborhoods."[12] We now find ourselves ministering in the context of X-reality, where "physical and digital worlds...often overlap in interesting and novel ways," thus it can be the case that the worship assembly "in which we are embedded spans those worlds too."[13] X-Reality queers the binary and sets God free to be present in, with, and for the complexity of our worship worlds.

Some theological possibilities for discerning the body in Luther

Martin Luther's proposals for reformation of theology and practice in the church emerge from the technocultural shifts of his time. By technoculture, I mean the patterns of knowing, relating, and communicating that emerge with our technologies. Luther certainly welcomed church engagement with novel platforms of communication and print technoculture as he sought to remove barriers to lay communion with the holy Word and Sacrament of Jesus Christ and increase participation and access for all.

As perhaps one of two non-Lutheran voices in this collection of essays, I can look admiringly at theological possibilities for valid online and hybrid holy communion. The historical-theological concerns of Luther about captivity of the Eucharist are an exciting partner to concerns about ableism and access to the Eucharist today. I read in Luther's writings the torment about church authorities denying lay people the gift of the Eucharist—an encounter with Christ's real presence that results in our offering of praise—and hearing the cries of disabled siblings. According to Luther, denying access to the Eucharist diminishes the validity

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of the sacrament. The mystery and awe of the sacrament should not result in a privileged holy few participating in its giftedness.

Luther maintains a sense of mystery and awe about the real presence of Christ in the sacrament that holds the door open for valid online communion. In Luther's 1540 "Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ," he argues against Ulrich Zwingli that Christ's human nature, united with the Word, is not subject to creaturely limitations of place.[14] Through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, rational human frameworks for how Christ can and should be present in the sacrament are disrupted. We have faith that Christ is really among us, for Christ made the promise in the Gospels when he said, "This *is* my body." Luther, though a theologian emerging in the shift to an Enlightenment era, resisted the human drive to rationalize every aspect of the sacrament. Speaking to the ubiquity and the mystery of how Christ's body is present with us, everywhere, all around the earth at the moment of consecration, he says, "the authority of God's Word is greater than the capacity of our intellect to grasp it."[15]

Jesus' words of institution are the substance of the Mass, according to Luther. We are to take and eat the signs of his body and blood in remembrance and faith, giving thanks as the Holy Spirit draws us closer to Christ and renders us different people. Luther speaks of the captivity "that nowadays they take every precaution that no lay person should hear these words of Christ."[16] As conversation shifts from whether valid communion can occur online or in hybrid scenarios, this line of argument from Luther can shape right practice. For the sacrament to be participated in efficaciously, all need to hear and reflect upon the words of institution. Likewise, all need to have a tangible (edible) sign before them that, when in faith and memory of Christ's words are received, enables the recipient in a sanctuary of First Lutheran Church or the sanctuary of home to become the Mass. As the gathering hears Christ's words of institution, whether in the same space as the priest or

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12. Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner. *Networked Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 7.

13. Campbell and Garner. *Networked Theology*, 92.

14. Martin Luther. *Disputation on the Divinity and Humanity of Christ.* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

15. Martin Luther. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," in *The Annotated Luther: Church and Sacraments, Vol. 3.* Paul W. Robinson, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 37.

16. Luther. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," 44.

connected visually and audibly online, in faith, all who remember and partake are communing.

Some closing (beginning) suggestions for meaning-full online/hybrid Eucharist

Moving past the limits of the dualistic schema, let us articulate what practices and postures make for meaningful online and hybrid Eucharist. I have a few suggestions that emerge from the concerns of this essay. First, it seems the best thing is for the body to assemble synchronously. The act of assembling at one time as one congregation across multiple spaces by the power of the Holy Spirit cultivates a place of encounter for and with the Body of Christ. The practice of recording and posting a video of the worship event is not as meaningful as being there live together.

Next, we must consider technologically what helps the online or hybrid assembly discern the body best. If possible, the experience should be reciprocal in hybrid formats, where some are at home and others in the sanctuary. A broadcast model, wherein people at home only receive a feed of what's happening in the building, is not best. How could the assembly in the building see and discern the dispersed body from their various spaces in one place? Zoom technologies and Neat Boards/Bars enable this equity of assembly.

With that visual and perhaps even auditory cue that the body is in one place, the leadership can ensure that their Calls to Worship and other forms of prayer in the ordo demonstrate their knowledge that the assembly is fully present, in person and online. Words from the Didache, that ancient guide for an early church in Syria, come to mind in a new way: *Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth.*

Finally, we can consider catechetical empowerment for rich participation from home. As Luther said, we must first ensure that all of the assembly hear and believe Christ's words, *This is my body, broken for you…my blood…for you.* Hear Luther's words again:

> "From this you will see that nothing else is needed for a worthy holding of Mass than a faith that relies confidently on this promise, believes Christ to be true in these words of his, and does not doubt that these infinite blessings have been bestowed upon it."[17]

The Words of Institution, spoken and heard or signed and read, with elements of bread and wine and the presence of assembly render the sacrament valid and efficacious. We can undoubtedly lean into the sacramental aspect of a participant's willing reception of the sacrament in our conversation about online communion.

How might leaders reflect on what could equip participants online, at home, to receive the sacrament willingly and efficaciously? How might folks at home learn more about the sacrament through instruction on preparing an altar? How might they learn about the church year through participation in domestic para-

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ments and tactile curation befitting the sacrament? What gestures could they make freely from their homes? How might they be taught to dispose of or consume the elements after the service ends?

This essay invited congregations to ask and discern together actions from the following question: How will you make your assembly one shared, blended place of presence-ing the body with Jesus Christ? This is especially important to Lutherans and your legacy of fighting for regular accessibility to God's Table.

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17. Luther. "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church," 43.