

Can we provide Holy Communion over the Web?
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Abstract

Although both local churches and denominations are now using the web, that use is primarily an extension of traditional advertising rather than as an instrument for reaching out to those not part of the institutional church. One way to more effectively use the web is to provide authentic worship opportunities directly via the web. For the Christian Church the central worship experience is Holy Communion. The issue raised here is whether any of the many Christian traditions can offer an authentic Communion experience over the web. This paper, written from a Wesleyan perspective, argues that we can provide Holy Communion over the web. Whether we agree or disagree with that assertion it is clear that religious organizations will have to accommodate themselves to the new technologies simply because an apparently increasing number of people are separated from the standard operating procedures of the institutional church.

Introduction

Whenever I broach the subject of providing Holy Communion on the web, the first question I am asked is, “why would you want to do that?” There are many reasons why we should investigate Communion on the Web:¹

1. To make Holy Communion available in the most inclusive way possible.
2. To provide Holy Communion when the potential *Communicant* feels the greatest need.
3. To allow access to Holy Communion to members and friends of the congregation who are home-bound.
4. To ensure that people who are institutionalized due to illness, incarceration, or other problems have access to Holy Communion.
5. To help those who are institutionally separated from the church due to educational, military, business, or other issues to continue to participate in the most important worship experience of a worshipping community.
6. To reach out to those not affiliated with the Christian church to provide an additional channel to seek God's love.
7. To help educate people concerning the importance of Holy Communion as a central rite of the church.
8. To provide an authentic worship experience via the web.

These reasons revolve around how we can effectively reach out to those separated from the church in our community, nation, and world – to ensure that pastoral care is available to everyone. As

Thomas Oden has noted,

No pastoral act is more central to the care of souls than the Supper where the resurrected Christ himself is present at the table. If all acts of pastoral care were stopped except Eucharist, the work of pastoral care would remain vital and significant.²

For the institutionally separated it is incumbent on the church to provide the means for authentic worship using all the tools at our disposal.

A common response when proposing to do Communion on the web is typified by that of the Rev. Andrew Thompson, a United Methodist pastor. Thompson has commented that the “Lord’s Supper, for instance, cannot be done online.”³³ The reason given by Thompson is that Christian community cannot exist on or take place over the web. On the other hand, Dr. Gregory S. Neal, another United Methodist pastor who has been experimenting with Communion on the web, says rather emphatically, “Yes! All one needs is some bread and some wine (grape juice will do), faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and a willingness to accept his Grace.”³⁴ This article is written from a United Methodist and distinctly Wesleyan perspective. The arguments put forth may not be appropriate for all denominations and are not shared by many members of my own denomination.

In the history of the church differing interpretations of Holy Communion have, not infrequently, separated us when that important rite of Christianity should bind us. I do believe, however, that it is possible to design a website that provides Holy Communion on the web and conforms to the standards as set forth in the “Articles of Religion” of the United Methodist Church which states that

It is not necessary that rites and ceremonies should in all places be the same, or exactly alike; for they have been always different, and may be changed according the diversity of countries, times, and men’s manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word.⁵

This, along with John Wesley's notion that Holy Communion is both a confirming and a converting rite, has led me to believe that we can, indeed, find a way to administer the Sacrament of Holy Communion over the web. Having made this declaration, however, it is important to recognize at least three questions relating to offering Communion on the web: 1) who can participate in the Sacrament; 2) can the communal aspects of the Eucharist be preserved in any sense; and 3) do problems occur concerning the consecration of the elements when Holy Communion is delivered over the web? Each of these questions will be briefly addressed in this paper.

It is incumbent on all of us to consider how new technologies can be used to foster the faith and to provide the means of grace rather than being afraid to use such tools. To understand what I am proposing, you can view a prototype of a possible web-based Communion service at <http://holycommunionontheweb.org/>.⁶

Who can take Communion?

Who can take Holy Communion? There are several answers to this question depending on the tradition to which one adheres: 1) those who are baptized and confirmed in a particular denomination; 2) those who are baptized and confirmed regardless of denomination; 3) those who are baptized; 4) those who have gone through a "conversion" experience; or 5) anyone who "comes in the door" seeking God's grace. The last approach is often characterized as "open Communion." Across most denominations practice is also likely to vary somewhat from stated theological positions. Twenty-first

Century Methodist practice falls, by and large, into the open Communion category.

The way in which contemporary Methodism came to practice open Communion has been a mixture of theology as practiced by John Wesley and his successors in both Great Britain and the United States and a significant admixture of pragmatism. This “pragmatic theology” toward the Eucharist resulted in a movement in Wesley’s attitude from one that insisted on baptism prior to participating in the Sacrament to later in life one that virtually ignored prior conditions for participation.⁷ Almost from the beginning of the Methodist movement there was friction between the Wesleys and many of the functionaries of the Church of England. As the Methodist Societies became more distant from the established church John Wesley found it necessary to revise some of his early, high church, thinking. Throughout his life, however, Wesley never varied from his view that Holy Communion was central to the spiritual life of a practicing Christian and that it should be taken as frequently and constantly as possible.

By the 1780s Wesley had so revised his view on ordination (by Bishops) and Apostolic Succession that he could first ordain for American Methodism and shortly thereafter for Scotland, and England itself. Methodist preachers needed the “authority” of ordination to provide Communion for the growing numbers of Methodists. Two things had happened within Methodism by the 1780s: Methodists were often refused Communion in local Anglican churches and the Methodist societies were admitting larger number of “dissenters” (members of a non-established Church in Britain; a Nonconformist) as well as those toward the bottom of the British class structure who were essentially undocumented

people. The 19th Century westward expansion in the United States, and Methodism's movement during that expansion, brought on the need for a similar pragmatic view of who could participate in the Lord's Supper. During the latter part of the 18th Century some Methodist preachers went further than Wesley and contended that no form of ordination was necessary to administer Communion. After all, it was argued, although the institutional church had assumed control of the right to administer the Lord's Supper, the biblical references that document the institution of the Sacrament in no way presume a priesthood with the sole authority to do so. More will be said of this below.

It does need to be acknowledged that not everyone could just drop into a Methodist meeting house. During the 18th Century, while Methodism was still considered to be a movement within the Church of England, admission to Methodist services was based on membership in a Methodist Society. Individuals were issued "tickets" to Methodist meetings (not the same as the field preaching for which Wesley became famous) and admission to those early worship services required the possession of a ticket. The ability to obtain a ticket was more an attestation of full participation in the Methodist societies than it was a theological issue. The use of ticketing for entrance into Methodist worship was largely gone by the early 19th Century in both England and the United States as Methodism moved from society to church. As a sociological phenomenon the movement from society to church was already underway long before Wesley's death. By late in Wesley's life the Methodist societies in America, Ireland, Scotland, and parts of England started competing with the Church of England for worship times (Sunday mornings), and then started providing Communion as part of that worship experience.⁸

The “bottom line” is that Wesley’s revision of what Apostolic Succession meant for ordination and the demands brought on by a more diverse array of people who were becoming Methodists in Great Britain and later in the westward expansion in the United States, laid the foundations for open Communion as it is practiced in the 21st Century. More broadly, anyone seeking God is invited to Holy Communion.

The Eucharist and Christian Community

The character of what constitutes “Christian Community” has been debated since the beginning and continues to the present. Needless to say, it will not be resolved here. It is important, however, to recognize that many people do not see how “Christian Community” can exist in a virtual (i.e., on the web) environment. The question posed here revolves around how “communal” Holy Communion must be. The normal response is that it is primarily communal with an individual component. Yet the church has a long history of providing Communion for individuals in isolation (for shut-ins, for example, who cannot physically attend a church service). For John Wesley the “communion” part of “Holy Communion” largely meant “communion with Christ,” rather than interaction with other people:

[Wesley] interprets that word in its *active* sense: communion actually *communicates* Christ and his benefits; i.e., Christ “works thereby” and employs it as an instrument for his purpose – an idea also found in other of Wesley’s writings.⁹

The foregoing quote is not the whole of Wesley’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper. It does,

however, illustrate an important idea that is relevant for this discussion: the primary point of contact in Communion is between the *Communicant* and Christ, not between the *Communicant* and other people. Our physical presence, as we are able, to participate in the sacraments in a church environment is always desirable, notwithstanding the validity of Communion taken in isolation.

The key phrase is physical participation with others “as we are able.” The point that must be made clearly is that we are not always able to be physically present in a church for such participation. Should that fact dictate that we are no longer part of the “Christian Community” generally, or of our own local community in particular? One way the church has traditionally approached the issue of inclusion is through the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. The Communion of Saints (which is related to our understanding of the church as the mystical body of Christ) is the union of all the "saints" – all of the church on Earth and in heaven. They are a single body, in which each person contributes to the good of all and shares in the welfare of all. This concept goes back to the early church and is encapsulated in the *Apostles' Creed*. The doctrine of the Communion of Saints is based on 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul compares Christians to a single body. In some sense, therefore, the church has for millennia had a doctrine of a virtual, as well as a physical, body of believers.¹⁰

We need to recognize also that even in a church setting we often do not successfully obtain a “community” in Holy Communion. Jesus, after all, instituted Holy Communion with a small group of twelve disciples, not with a congregation of hundreds. Communion in the early church likely took place in relatively small groups. Logic and history would seem to dictate that Holy Communion can, therefore,

only take place in small groups where a sense of physical community can be immediately perceived. The church as a whole, however, has rejected the idea that Communion can only be offered in small groups. Some denominations have sought to simulate a small group environment by having people take Communion sitting in the pews and passing the bread and wine from one to another, by bringing people to the Communion rail in small groups then formally dismissing those groups, or by the use of a common cup rather than through the use of individual portions of the wine or grape juice. Through the 1960s in the United States the common practice in The Methodist Church was to invite *Communicants* to the Communion rail in groups, administer the Sacrament, then provide a “dismissal” prayer. Although some United Methodist churches still follow that practice, most now follow a more individualized procedure.

That community in Communion in a church can fail in a rather radical manner is typified by a private communication from a person who has used holycommunionontheweb.org to take Communion:

Recently I heard about your website and was very intrigued.... I am 100% blind with two other documented disabilities and have never had any sight.... The Methodists are supposed to be an inclusive denomination, but I can't get a ride to any church and no clergy will bring me communion and pray with me. When I've been able to go to church, I have to sit alone and no one ever [sic] reads the bulletin. So I was really excited to find out about this site.... Thank you for your efforts.¹¹

Clearly this correspondent has no feeling of community in a church environment.

Can a lone *Communicant* be part of a community when s/he is guided through Communion via some electronic medium? An important point made by John Wesley was that in the Eucharist God operates independently and objectively in the *Communicant*. Wesley commented at one point that if God did not operate objectively in the sacrament then Christ “would surely have warned us; he would

have revealed it long ago.’¹² This is one way of describing the “Communion of the Holy Spirit.”

Moreover, the *Communicant* is (or can be) part of that larger body, the Communion of Saints.

When working with the web we often use the term “virtual” to refer to some non-corporeal activity. Holy Communion on the web is not a “virtual Communion,” however, because the “communion” in all cases takes place between the *Communicant* and God. What is “virtual” in a web-based Communion service is the liturgical guide through which the ritual of Holy Communion is delivered. The *Communicant* will be real and corporeal as will be the bread and the wine (the elements) used in the service. And the presence of God will always be real for the *Communicant*.

The communal side of Communion offered via the web can also be thought of as involving the collective number of people who may be guided through the Communion liturgy in a church or on the web, who have done so in the past, or who will do so in the future. This is similar to, if not identical with, the Communion of Saints. If taken into account liturgically, this point can be presented during a web-based Communion service so that it is real and important to the *Communicant*. This interpretation is reasonably consistent with the views of such early Methodists as Lady D’Arcy Maxwell, a person who gave considerable thought to the need for and implications of frequent Communion.¹³ She looked on constant Communion as an act of obedience to Christ. For her it formed a bond of union among God's faithful followers and the most intimate participation of God in the life of the believer. The Sacrament became, if not the primary means of grace, certainly one of the most important. It was a practical avowal of the Christian's attachment to Christ as well as a renewal of the covenant between

God and his church. Wesley's "evangelical" concerns led him from a rather doctrinaire High Church (or juridical) position to a modified High Church position with a resulting vagueness concerning the positive nature of the church.¹⁴ The belief that a valid Communion can take place only in a church, or at least physically with others, suggests to me a more juridical understanding of the church than the church as the mystical body of Christ or even as a community of believers.

Wesley incorporated all three views of the church into his thinking, notwithstanding the problem that an understanding of the church as a community of believers and as the mystical body of Christ may conflict with an understanding of the church as a juridical body. For our purposes here, however, it is Wesley's belief in the church as the mystical body of Christ that is most relevant. The church conceived as a "community of believers" propounds a kind of religious individualism, while the concept of the "mystical body of Christ" promotes the communal and corporate (but not the juridical) character of the church. However, the communalism of the mystical body of Christ is not only a communalism of physical proximity, it is also a communalism of the spirit.

Edgar Thompson points out that at various times Wesley defined the church "not by the form of its government, but by the faith and life of its members."¹⁵ John Todd concurs that "Wesley believed in the communion of saints, and held that the church was Christ's mystical body. . . ."¹⁶ When we view the church as the mystical body of Christ, along with the further concept of the community of saints, we have the basis for contending that even should someone be led through Holy Communion on the web, that person is still part of the larger community of Christians, past, present, and future.

The corporatism of the "mystical body of Christ" is a concept of spiritual relationships rather than a corporatism demanded by legal rights and obligations. For the doctrines of the church as a community of believers or as the mystical body of Christ, church organization and social structure are unimportant. Most Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, hold to both concepts, but the Catholic tradition (both Roman and non-Roman) extends beyond these to the church as a juridical body while much of Protestantism stops with them.

One additional point needs to be mentioned. Remember that in the Wesleyan context there is a rather clear individual element because through the sacrament, the *Communicant* connects with God apart from, or in addition to, the larger community. In contrast to the reformed tradition, which sees Communion only as a fellowship meal and where Communion is taken seated, in the Wesleyan tradition, following 18th Century Anglican practice, Communion is normally taken kneeling before the table/altar, thus symbolizing the vertical (individual) relationship between God and *Communicant* with the Eucharist as a sacrificial meal.¹⁷ The point is, while the communal character of Holy Communion is important, it need not be such a limiting factor that we are precluded from new ways of observing the Lord's Supper. We must recognize that it is difficult to satisfy the communal aspect of Holy Communion on the Web. The key here is that it is "difficult," but not impossible.

Even before Holy Communion is a communal act, it is a means God has chosen to make his grace known to people. That grace is available to us independently and Holy Communion is a rite that helps us center and focus on the acceptance of God's grace. Holy Communion on the Web should be

viewed as a supplement to Holy Communion in a church, not as a substitute for more institutional forms. If, however, the communal aspect of Holy Communion on the Web is a problem for an individual, Communion sites on the web can be used with others rather than alone. At least one person who has used the website reported in an email that ...

The communion experience was better than I had anticipated. Three of us used it as part of our weekend [re]treat and Sunday worship together. We were able to experience communion with community.... Thank you for your efforts to bring worship and communion in new ways.¹⁸

There are also some technical aids that might help attenuate concern over this issue by displaying the number of people taking Communion concurrently and/or by displaying the names and locations of those people.

When all is said and done, however, is it our place to deny an important means of grace to those separated from the institutional church by a requirement that an “authentic” communion can take place only in a church?

Can we Consecrate and Serve the Elements over the Web?

The short answer to this question is , “Yes, we can!” At the beginning of this paper we considered the reasons for proposing that Holy Communion be offered over the web. The underlying reason is that the institutional church is failing to reach substantial numbers of people. Consequently, the institutional church is denying the church’s most important means of finding God’s grace to a significant number of people. To understand how this is so we must first consider two additional questions:

1. Who has the authority to administer Holy Communion?
2. How can we administer Holy Communion over the web?

To answer these questions we need to have recourse to historical precedence and contemporary practice.

Who has the authority to Administer Holy Communion and to Consecrate the elements?

As the church became increasingly institutionalized, perhaps as early as the 2nd or 3rd Centuries of the Christian era, it insisted that it was the sole mediator between individual Christians and God, including the due administration of Holy Communion. By “due administration” is meant not only the entire Communion liturgy, but also the specific part of the liturgy when the elements (the bread and wine) are consecrated. In the 21st Century, when people are able to gather in a wide variety of communities, including virtual communities, the continued insistence of the institutional church regarding its authority is, at the best, questionable. Because I came out of the Wesley and Methodist tradition the paragraphs that follow use the Methodist experience as a case study illustrating the issues involved in answering the question of who can consecrate the elements during Holy Communion.

What constitutes a “valid” consecration relates to how we view the church, ordination, and the meaning of “the priesthood.” Although it has always been a minority view, there has been disagreement among Methodists and others concerning the need for ordination to be able to provide Communion. This disagreement extends back to Wesley’s time¹⁹ and even further to the early Christian church.

Formal ordination in many denominations, including those in the Methodist tradition, is theoretically a requirement in order to administer Holy Communion although as in the United Methodist Church actual practices undermine this point-of-view.²⁰

I initially conceived the concept of offering Holy Communion on the Web from the perspective of Methodism and the Wesleyan tradition within the more general context of Protestantism. In general, John Wesley's occasional protests notwithstanding, Methodism probably has more in common with the tradition that comes from Roman Catholicism through Anglicanism to Methodism than with the continental reformers of the 16th Century. I will, therefore, first examine the question of "authority" in early Methodism and then move on to contemporary concepts both in and out of the Wesleyan tradition. The question of *who* has the authority to say the words of consecration today varies by denomination and ranges from individuals ordained in some "Apostolic Succession"²¹ to lay persons.

As we hear in the Communion liturgy, after Jesus gave the bread to his disciples, he said, "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." After giving the cup to his disciples he said, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." These words of institution and subsequent lines constitute the consecration of the elements of bread and wine in the Communion liturgy. After a reading of Peter King's *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity, and Worship of the Primitive Church* in January, 1746, John Wesley came to feel that bishops were superior to priests administratively, but not in divine order.²² This is important because the tradition out of which Wesley came dictated that only priests ordained by bishops could legitimately

celebrate Holy Communion. By this assertion Wesley laid the foundation for significant doubt about *who* can be a legitimate *Celebrant* of (i.e., the person who conducts) Holy Communion. As will be noted, this is important when we evaluate both *who* can deliver Holy Communion over the web and *how* it can be accomplished.

John Wesley became something of an expert on the early church, as his modification of the concept of for the purpose of ordination testifies. He was certainly aware that in the first century of the Christian era Holy Communion was administered mostly without “benefit of clergy.”²³ It was only as the church (conceived as the entire Christian community) became more institutionalized in the 2nd and 3rd centuries that there was an effort to concentrate the sacramental prerogatives of the church in its emerging clergy and hierarchy. Thus ordination became a requirement to administer Holy Communion as a means of maintaining hierarchical power and control within the institutional church, as it is today among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists and most other denominations.

While John Wesley was, at least initially, a believer in ordination only by a bishop in the appropriate , his ordination of ministers for America, then for Scotland, and finally for England itself, undermined that early viewpoint as did the latitude Wesley gave his lay preachers in the conduct of worship and the Sacrament. Contemporary practices in the United Methodist Church in the United States also dilute Wesley’s early concerns about ordination.²⁴ The important and essential theological point, however, is that John Wesley believed that in the Eucharist God operates independently and objectively in the *Communicant* (essentially Wesley’s understanding of the “Real Presence” of Christ

in the Sacrament). Sometimes it appears that for Wesley it was not even necessary that the *Communicant* believe that the Sacrament is any more than an ancient ritual.²⁵ This independent action of God through the Lord's Supper is the basis for Wesley's strong view that Communion is both a confirming rite *and* a converting rite.²⁶ What happens between God and the *Communicant* in Communion opens the *Communicant* to God's Holy Spirit. It is not that the words spoken in the Communion service are some magic incantation by an "authorized" person, but that the ritual is one of the primary means instituted to get the attention of people so that individuals will open themselves as recipients of God's Grace.

From early in its organizational history, as a renewal movement within the Church of England, Methodism was implicitly (and later explicitly) divided between those who believed that the Methodist societies should not compete with the established church for worship times and the administration of Holy Communion (sometimes referred to as the "church party") and those who believed that people should not be prohibited from worship and the Sacrament just because a Church of England priest and church were not available.²⁷ John Wesley, due in large part to his growing dependence on his lay preachers, tended to "look the other way" when reports came in that they were conducting worship services and providing Holy Communion, competing with the local Anglican church. Other factors that contributed to Wesley's perspective were the increasing diversity of religious backgrounds (or lack thereof) among Methodists and the increasing tendency for Anglican clergy to prohibit Methodists from taking Communion in their churches.

As early as the 1760s several lay preachers started administering Holy Communion.²⁸

Somewhat later Thomas Taylor was among Wesley's preachers who dealt with the issues surrounding the administration of Communion among Methodists. Taylor made several relevant points, but the important one here is that people seeking God through the Sacrament should not be denied Communion simply because a church or an "authorized" person is unavailable. Taylor indicated that while he believed it lawful for one who was not ordained to give the Sacrament, he "did not think it expedient, to celebrate the Lord's Supper without some formality of that kind."²⁹ This was clearly a political judgment rather than a theological argument. Although he finally was ordained through a Methodist imposition of "laying on of hands," Taylor was always soft on the need for ordination to perform Communion.³⁰

In the United States a situation similar to Taylor's arose in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the early part of the 19th Century. At that time Francis Asbury (Wesley's American successor) successfully stopped the attempt to authorize lay persons to administer the Eucharist. As James F. White has noted, the action by Asbury "seems to have been more a matter of church discipline than to defend a traditional approach to the sacrament."³¹ Like the incident with Taylor in England, the efforts for a more liberal approach to the administration of Communion confronted ecclesiastical politics rather than a conscious effort to debate the theological issue. The point is, however, that Wesley along with at least some of his followers, in both his theory and practice, thought that Holy Communion was more important than fact or fiction about the institutional church. This point should be something of a lesson for Methodists and others wedded to the power ("authority?") of the institutional church.

Today there are recognized denominations that hark back to the 1st Century church and do not demand that sacraments be exclusively administered by clergy. New denominations (Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, for example, founded during the 19th Century) were forming on what was then the frontier in America. These denominations did two things that probably influenced at least some frontier Methodists: they instituted weekly Communion as part of their regular worship and they insisted, then and now, that lay administration of the Sacrament was valid. There was extensive interaction among all the frontier denominations, especially through the camp meeting movement and this interaction cannot have failed to communicate some differences in the way in which Communion was provided.³²

Can we consecrate the elements over the web? Based on this brief analysis it would appear that there is no serious theological or historical reason to assume that we cannot. By involving the *Communicant* in the liturgy, especially with the consecration of the elements, we can go beyond a merely recorded method of administering the Sacrament to one more consistent with the 1st Century church and with alternative approaches within the institutional church.

How can we administer Holy Communion over the web?

One of the issues confronting the provision of Holy Communion on the web is that a web-based Communion service requires that most or all the service be prerecorded. A prerecorded consecration would seem, on the surface, to be almost absurd since the *Celebrant* would seem to be a computer

rather than a denominationally authorized person. One possible way to mitigate the “absurdity” of the situation, however, may be to have the *Communicant* participate in the administration of Communion, including the consecration. This would certainly appear to be following the practices of the early church as well as the practices of at least some contemporary Christians. It can be argued, following the practices of the 1st Century church, that it is possible for persons seeking spiritual insight through Holy Communion can participate in a self-administered or lay-administered Communion service. It can also be argued that allowing direct lay participation in the administration of the Eucharist is a contemporary response to John Wesley’s dictum that Christians should participate in the Sacrament as frequently as possible.

There are various ways in which lay participation might be accomplished over the web. One way would be to have the *Communicant* repeat after the *Celebrant* the words of institution and consecration. Another way would be to rework the “Prayer of Consecration” so that it is fully interactive with the essential lines being said by the *Communicant* guided by the *Celebrant*. A third way might be to simply ask the *Communicant* to repeat with the *Celebrant* the entire “Prayer of Consecration.” These suggestions are consistent with a broad interpretation of the Protestant notion of the “priesthood of all believers” and with those who advocate a liberalization of our understanding of who can administer Communion. They also bring back to the service of Holy Communion the importance of the sacrament to the early church, if not exactly the procedures followed in the 1st Century. By requiring the *Communicant* to follow closely a theologically and historically appropriate liturgy we maintain a continuity with the manner in which Communion is traditionally administered. Such

a service may not be able to be presented in every denominational context, but it can certainly be presented in a Christian framework.

The recounting of the early Methodist controversies, along with the wide variety of ways contemporary Christian denominations seek sacramental authority, should strongly suggest that there is no one “right” way that exists and that perhaps every Christian has the authority to administer Holy Communion. Proposals to provide Communion over the web simply extend the discussion that has been going on for centuries. In the United States during the first decade of the 21st Century there has been a move to tighten United Methodist practice regarding Communion.³³ For the rite that is the most important means of grace in the church universal we need to be cautious about limiting Holy Communion and limiting access to the Eucharist for those for whom Communion can be the way in which they find God’s love. In answer to the original question of this section, “Can we provide Holy Communion over the web?” the answer seems to be that we can do so in a manner that is both traditionally viable, theologically appropriate, and liturgically consistent with ancient practices. With the technology available today, perhaps the time has come for ordinary Christians to reclaim their own authority to access directly the good news of God’s love without the intervention of a moribund hierarchy.

Conclusions

There are other issues related to the offering of Communion over the web. A web-based

Communion service is unlikely to work for members of denominations that have a highly juridical understanding of the nature of the Church, for example. Nor will it be likely to work for those believing that Baptism is a prior requirement to taking Communion or for those in traditions that do not observe an “open” Communion. It is also necessary to provide some guidance in spiritual and liturgical preparation. The need for more widely available Communion is present, however. With some minimal agreement on the two issues of the communal aspects of Communion and the legitimacy of consecration it is my belief that we can appropriately use the power of the web for providing Holy Communion to the institutionally separated folks among us.

What should a service of Holy Communion on the web encompass? What should it look like?

One approach is the prototype I mentioned at the beginning that may be seen, with permission, at <http://holycommunionontheweb.org>, although it must be stressed that this is a work in progress and does not yet include some of the suggestions noted below:

1. The web presentation should provide as far as possible an “authentic” worship experience:
 - a. It should be interactive and participatory. The *Communicant* needs to be incorporated into the experience including instructions on how to prepare the physical elements of bread and wine for use in the service.³⁴
 - b. It needs to change so that it is not static. Technically this can be accomplished through a

database driven design.

- c. There need to be options for feedback about the service to a “real” person who will respond to email or other available means of electronic communication.
 - d. It needs to be biblically-based, the best way being to tie the service to the Christian liturgical year and the Common Lectionary with appropriate readings each time the site is accessed. The service can be structured so that readings, prayers, and other components change by date. The liturgy can also be altered by time of day by incorporating prayers and other elements derived from the traditional offices of the day.
2. The website for the service of Holy Communion must have some instructional and devotional materials relating to Holy Communion so that a *Communicant* can be properly prepared spiritually.
3. Technically the design of the web site needs to incorporate an interactive approach to presenting the service, and to make use of the variety of media opportunities now available on the web.

I contend that the church has the obligation to make the most important of Christian worship experiences available to as many as possible as part of the way in which we reach out to those not in a

regular and constant relationship through the church itself and as a way of bringing those people into fellowship with the church. It is time to make creative use of the means of communication now available to provide authentic worship experiences and especially Holy Communion for the maximum number of people possible.

Notes

1. The problem of how to deliver Holy Communion to people who are not part of, or only peripherally related to, the institutional church has resulted in controversy within Christendom for centuries.
2. Thomas C. Oden, *Ministry Through Word and Sacrament* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 154.
3. Andrew C. Thompson, "Facebook friendships: a means of grace?" *United Methodist Reporter*, September 21, 2007, p. 6B.
4. See Gregory S. Neal, "F.A.Q. About Holy Communion on the Web," <http://www.revneal.org/communionfaq.html> (Link valid as of December 2, 2007), Question 2.
5. *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2004* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), Article XXII, p. 65. The United Methodist (UMC) "Articles" is Wesley's edited version of the Anglican articles of religion. The UMC article is almost identical to Article XXXIV of the Anglican/Episcopal Church; see *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1979), p. 874. Both versions reserve the "authority" to make changes to some form of institutional church although neither establishes a procedure for making such changes.
6. The website is currently off-line (1/13/2009) due to a directive of my Bishop contending that I have exceeded my authority as a Licensed Local Pastor duly appointed to a local church. Please check it from time-to-time to see if this issue has been resolved.
7. John C. Bowmer, *The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in Early Methodism* (London: Dacre Press, 1951), p. 107. The reference in Bowmer is to Wesley in 1740. Even that early, however, Wesley was stipulating only baptism (not confirmation) be required for taking Communion although the Church of England at that time also required confirmation prior to first taking Communion.

8. Baptism was not a requirement for membership in the Methodist Societies. Early on, since the Societies were thought to be part of the Church of England, baptism was assumed. Later, however, when dissenters and undocumented people started joining the assumption of baptism could not be maintained. The only requirement for membership was a willingness to seek Christ as savior and to repent of one's sins.
9. Ole E. Borgen, *John Wesley on the Sacraments: A Theological Study* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Francis Asbury Press, 1985), p. 184.
10. Neal, Question 9, makes a similar argument.
11. Personal email to author from Linda Brown, November 13, 2008, following the publication of an interview with author entitled, "Click in Remembrance of Me," *Newsweek*, November 4, 2008. For the article see <http://www.newsweek.com/id/165676>.
12. For a little more on this, see Thomas Wm. Madron, "Wesley, the Methodists, and the Eucharist in Early Methodist Liturgical Practices", a paper delivered at the 10th Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, Oxford, England, August, 1997, p. 2 (available for download at <http://ewcnet.com/personal/oxford10.pdf> as of December 2, 2007). For information concerning the Oxford Institute, see <http://www.oxford-institute.org>. See also, John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (14 vols.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d., photo offset from the authorized edition published by the Wesleyan Conference Office in London, England, 1872), vol. v, Sermon xvi, p. 195 (These volumes are hereinafter referred to as *Works*, with appropriate prescripts [Journal Thoughts upon Slavery, etc.] and postscripts [Sermon cx, etc.]); and Colin W. Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 160.
13. Madron, pp. 6-7. See also, John Lancaster, *The Life of Darcy, Lady Maxwell, of Pollock; Late of Edinburgh*, 2nd Edition (London: J. Kershaw, 1826), p. 92, and William Atherton, *The Life of Darcy, Lady Maxwell*, 5th Edition (London: John Mason, 1863), pp. 41- 43.
14. See Edgar W. Thompson, *John Wesley: Apostolic Man* (London. The Epworth Press, 1957), p. 14; and John M. Todd, *John Wesley and the Catholic Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), pp. 166, 170.
15. Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
16. Todd, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-175.
17. For more detailed documentation on this point, see Madron, pp. 3-4.
18. Personal email to author from anonymous, November 9, 2008.

19. See Madron, pp. 4-5, for more on the early Methodist issues. Today the discussions revolve around the limitations on Local Pastors in the administration of Communion.
20. The condition of ordination among United Methodists is in even greater disarray than just the issue of Local Pastors authority (see Endnote 24). On October 19, 2008, at Mt. Vernon Place UMC in Baltimore, MD, two women, one a professed lesbian and the second a staunch supporter of inclusiveness, were ordained in an ecumenical service of “extraordinary ordination.” The service, apparently similar to the one in which Thomas Taylor was ordained, is well within the Methodist tradition (see Endnote 25). Similar to the attitudes of the Church of England toward Wesley and his preachers in 18th Century England, however, the United Methodist Council of Bishops issued a statement saying that extraordinary ordination “has no official status within The United Methodist Church.” In the United Methodist Church there are several fiscal and bureaucratic issues that preclude the ordination of persons “without portfolio” that have little to do with the religiosity of the individual who is refused ordination or whose ordination is not recognized. Relevant news reports:
<http://www.umc.org/site/apps/nlnet/content3.aspx?c=twL4KnN1LtH&b=2072519&ct=6269881> (valid link as of 2/3/2009); and
http://www.inareaumc.org/2009/Jan09/extraordinary_ordination.htm (valid link as of 2/3/2009).
21. is a doctrine, held by some Christian denominations, which asserts that the chosen successors (“properly” ordained bishops) of the Twelve Apostles, from the first century to the present day, have inherited the spiritual, ecclesiastical and sacramental authority, power, and responsibility that were conferred upon them, in a more-or-less unbroken chain, by the Apostles, who in turn received their spiritual authority from Jesus Christ. Essential to maintaining the is the proper consecration of bishops. Protestants (other than Anglicans and some Methodists in a loose Anglican tradition) consider the authority given to the apostles as unique, proper to the Apostles alone. They reject any doctrine of a succession of their power. The Protestant view of ecclesiastical authority differs accordingly. See “Apostolic succession.” *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th Edition*, 10/1/2009. Web: 20 Feb 2010.
22. When Wesley first read King’s book he oversimplified it a little when he said that it “would follow from King that Bishops and Presbyters are (essentially) of one order” (*Journal, Works*, Vol. II, p. 6, January, 1746). Thompson (op. cit., p. 25) comments that this “must be one of the rare cases in which an argument has converted an Anglo-Catholic.”
23. Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills: The World Before and After Jesus* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 140, Succinctly describes the Lord’s Supper in the 1st Century church as follows: “Within each of the larger communities of the Jesus Movement, such as at Ephesus and Rome, there were several subcommunities. Since there were too many Ephesian and Roman Messianists for a single meeting, each subcommunity would meet separately in some designated home to celebrate the Lord's Supper. These clandestine meetings are the beginning of the ‘house-churches’ of the Jesus Movement. Some of these

houses will at length, after the legalization of Christianity in the early fourth century, be turned into public churches. Each house-church looked after its own affairs as best it could, and responsibilities (such as taking care of the poor and making arrangements for the celebration of the Lord's Supper) rotated among those who could best take them up. The owner of the house—often a woman, such as Chloe—would have been the person who normally presided at the Lord's Supper (or Eucharist, i.e., Thanksgiving). This was as close as the Messianists came to having a power structure.”

24. In the United Methodist Church Licensed Local Pastors (not ordained) can, while duly appointed as pastor of a local church, administer the sacraments. This is primarily a juridical (i.e., legal and administrative) decision not related to the “” from which ordained clergy are often thought to derive their authority. Lay persons can also take Communion to shut-ins using previously consecrated elements “following a service of Word and Table.” *Book of Discipline, 2004*, p. 532. Unfortunately this concept of lay administration harks back to a medieval understanding of the sacrament that is foreign to most Protestant interpretations of the Eucharist and is actually a more “magical” understanding of the consecration.
25. See Madron, p. 2, for a more complete discussion of this assertion.
26. Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “Table Etiquette: Means and Manners,” <http://www.gbod.org/worship/articles/table.html> (Link valid as of December 2, 2007) suggests that American Methodists may have overly interpreted Wesley’s concept of Communion as a converting rite. There is, however, a substantial literature on this point that makes the argument in favor of a more expansive view of Wesley’s notion.
27. John’s tendency to look the other way when his lay preachers provided Holy Communion in Methodist meeting houses and to his decision to perform ordinations of others caused a significant rift between John and Charles Wesley that had the potential for splitting Methodism. The disagreement started as early as the 1740s and extended through Charles’ death in 1788. This rift is chronicled in Charles Wesley’s biography by John R. Tyson, *Assist Me To Proclaim* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), Chapters 17 and 19.
28. See specifically Tyson, pp. 274ff.
29. Ibid. Note John Telford (ed.), *Wesley's Veterans*, "Thomas Taylor", vol. vii (Salem, OH: Schmull Publishers, n.d., reprinted from the edition of 1912), p. 91.
30. “Thomas Taylor,” *Wesley's Veterans*, p. 88.
31. James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 158. White was following the work of William N.

Wade, "A History of Public Worship in the Methodist Episcopal Church," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1981, pp. 146-152.

32. White, p. 175.
33. See Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2005). For a somewhat more restricted interpretation of Wesley's understanding of Communion generally, see also, Westerfield Tucker.
34. William H. Willimon, in *Sunday Dinner* (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1981), has suggested that the "Sacraments are *visible and physical acts* of God's self-giving love" (italics are Willimon's).