Spirit and truth: Reckoning with the crises of Covid-19 for the Church

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Abstract
The Covid-19 pandemic forces North American churches to reckon with long-standing crises and questions surrounding online community, access to worship, decline in membership, the struggle of small congregations, and the reality of our global communion. This article describes a response grounded in faith defined as confidence in our liberation from pride and despair through Jesus Christ. There is need for clarity of doctrine and spiritual courage to fulfill the church’s twofold mission to sustain and grow the body of Christ; both these tasks require courage to approach and speak from the Gospel in ever-new contexts and ages.

KEYWORDS
coronavirus, Covid-19, Lutheran Confessions, Martin Luther, pandemic, virtual communion

1 MORE THAN WEATHERING THE STORM

There is a grave temptation for North American churches facing the Covid-19 crisis and the necessary social distancing measures that accompany it: the temptation is to do nothing more than weather the storm afloat, tending like Noah to those on the ark, and waiting for the high waters to recede. Yet this is not the great flood, and outside the church community there is not a barren seascape but a world of people hungry for the message of God’s love and salvation. The pandemic is a time of reckoning—a moment that forces confrontation with long-standing underlying issues that threaten to undermine the future vibrancy of Christianity in America. The alluring hope to wait it out ignores the crises and delays the transformation of death unto new life that must happen sooner or later.

Like every time of reckoning, this one requires that we know the truth that we confess and that we have the courage to confess it. Indeed, knowing itself requires courage—courage to ask how God is working here and now; courage to ask how the truths handed down to us liberate believers in an ever new world filled with ever new dangers and anxieties, possibilities and hopes; courage to ask if our scripture and tradition have answers for us. This essay proposes a doctrinal and spiritual response to the present moment shaped by Luther and the Lutheran Confessions; it is written in response to current debates in circles around the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)—particularly debates about so-called “virtual communion”—by a professor who teaches Reformation history and theology and the Confessions. I hope, nonetheless, that the essay may offer some insight for readers beyond the ELCA world.
Above all, I describe a doctrine and spirituality grounded in confidence in our liberation through Jesus Christ. This confidence in Christ is what Luther and early Lutherans called faith. Faith is the assurance through God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ that God wants human beings to live eternally with God and one another, not to succumb to the ravages of disease or to destroy ourselves through shortsighted antagonism; faith transforms our perspective on the here and now, so that we are confident of God’s presence and help even amid personal and corporate struggle; faith teaches joyful, assured devotion to our calling as members of Christ’s body to be for others. I describe here a twofold mission of the church, belonging to the whole priesthood of believers but in a special way to those set aside for leadership, to sustain and feed those within the body of Christ and to proclaim Christ to others—to grow the body. I argue that the courage of faith must be our goal in teaching and our fundamental spiritual disposition if we are to reckon with the crises of the present moment—crises accelerated but not created by the Covid-19 pandemic. We need to face this reckoning with credible development of our theological and church tradition to meet new challenges and with fidelity to our calling in Christ—and this will require deep spiritual assurance that our work and lives have meaning before God and others.

I have divided this article into four sections. In the first, I describe some of the larger issues that surround debate over “virtual communion” in the Lutheran context. In the second, I argue that we need to employ responsible principles for reading and teaching the Confessions in the present moment; just as vitally, we need to receive and cultivate the Spirit needed to proclaim this truth. The third section describes core teaching principles—that faith liberates us from pride and despair and impels us to mutual care and mission; that the church is equipped always to speak in new ages and contexts and to new challenges, because the church incarnate as Christ’s body must live, breathe, and unite its members amid the diversity of human history and culture. These core principles, I argue, shape and invite a spirituality of courage. Finally, in the fourth section, I apply these principles and this spirituality to present crises, arguing that this moment is one for thinking about how the church will grow into the future.

2 | COVID-19 AND THE CRISSES OF THE CHURCH

The Covid-19 pandemic increases the urgency of questions and intensifies crises that have long been pressing upon North American churches, including the ELCA. In the ELCA, debate about “virtual communion” raises the deeper question of the legitimacy of online community: Is online community antithetical to the witness of a church founded on the doctrine that God saves us through means of grace, through material elements, and words spoken by fellow human beings? Or, might such community be deeper in some ways than physical community? Are “virtual” means essential for mission in the modern world?

Meanwhile, the objection that online communion excludes those without sufficient internet access forces us to confront seriously the exclusion that already happens around our worship spaces and times: congregations are located according to historical patterns of human movement and settlement, not necessarily in response to present need; worship spaces and gatherings may be alienating for some, and Sunday morning worship excludes those compelled to work, including those who are bearing the brunt of the health crisis: medical professionals, grocery store employees, delivery drivers.

The debate over online communion may also prove to be a debate carried out over table settings as the cloth and table underneath are pulled away. The financial pressure on small congregations created by the inability to gather and the unreadiness of older members to shift to online giving may cut a swath through the American religious landscape. This possibility, in turn, reveals the long-running reality that congregations sometimes cling to brick and mortar in ways that diminish their capacity to missionize and to grow. Members of these communities deserve good preaching and pastoral care like all believers; but the parish system that accompanied whole families from cradle to grave was not prepared for the kids to move away.

If we take a global view of the present moment, finally, we find that the debate over “virtual communion” can look like the self-obsession of the privileged; the matter is not on the table (bad pun intended) for brothers and sisters around the world and for many in our own land. This problem is not new: privileged North American churches must speak to and serve people in their context, but in that very task, we must see the less privileged peoples to whom we are bound both as Christians and as global citizens. We need to hear the voices of the less privileged because it is essential to our own renewal. These voices remind us that our context is not so small as we think it is; that both as members of the body of Christ and as citizens of the world we are interconnected to others and our voices and choices reverberate for good or for ill.

3 | DOCTRINE AND SPIRITUALITY

Constructive discussion of the appropriate course of action requires a foundation: Lutherans (and other protestants too) have special esteem for the voice of Martin Luther, who just so happens to have written a rather pertinent...
text on Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague.\textsuperscript{15} We also have learned to see Luther as a contextual theologian, as someone whose proclamation of the gospel spoke to the specific religious crises of his day—to a theological and ecclesial structure that taught Christians to ascend to God via merit and thus sowed pride and anxiety.\textsuperscript{16} In this contextual perspective, the Gospel remains the same, but it must speak in ways and words familiar to and meaningful for the people among whom it is embodied. Thus, the question, “What would Luther say?” is never the right question; who is this hypothetical Luther that we interrogate? Is he a 537-year-old man changed by living through the scientific revolution, the French and American Revolutions, the Second World War and the Holocaust, the colonial era and its collapse, the fraught experiences of racial minorities in America, and so forth? Or is he a 50-year-old man who has been transported suddenly into the modern world—a man who would surely find himself a little dazed and confused? The necessary question is not, What would Luther say?, but what does Luther’s insight into the gospel have to teach us now?

Beyond Luther himself, the ELCA constitution enshrines all texts in the Book of Concord (1580) as authentic confessions of the gospel, describing the unaltered Augsburg Confession as “a true witness to the Gospel” and the other texts as “further valid interpretations of the faith of the Church.”\textsuperscript{17} Yet the ELCA does not treat these texts as literally applicable to the here and now in toto—otherwise there could be no apology to Anabaptists, nor women in the pulpit since Philip Melanchthon agreed with 1 Timothy 2:15 that women are saved through childbearing (if they do so as believers, Melanchthon explained).\textsuperscript{18}

For Lutherans, our Lutheran texts must guide our response and witness in this moment: we believe in them, they shape our understanding of scripture and of God’s interaction with the world through Christ and the Holy Spirit, and without them, we have no unique witness in the present moment. Of course we must ask how to read and use historical confessional texts in the present; we must ask the same question about scripture, and Luther and the Confessions in fact help us to find the meaning of scripture for us around the doctrine of faith.

To meet the crises of the present moment, we need to know the truth that we profess. Likewise, we need to claim and exercise a spirituality that makes us effective bearers of truth. While spirituality is often imagined as something that is personal and that happens outside “institutions”—indeed, the prevailing assumption is that spirituality is stifled by structures of authority and doctrine—there has in fact always been a Christian spirituality. Philip Sheldrake defines spirituality from the perspective of the comparative study of religions as “the deepest values and sense of meaning by which people seek to live. ‘Spirituality’ embodies some kind of vision of the human spirit and of what will enable people to achieve their fullest, even transcendent potential.”\textsuperscript{19} On a theoretical level, it is simply impossible to imagine a spirituality unstructured by some understanding of “the way things are,” carried out by those who are free from the prior shaping of community. In turn, it would be dangerous to adhere to a spirituality without any conception of how the individual ought to relate to the divine, to others, and to the natural world. For my classes, and for purposes of this essay, I define spirituality as follows: the way that communities and individuals appropriate and live out the claims of the Christian faith in their particular contexts.\textsuperscript{20}

\section{Spirit and Truth in the Present Moment}

I wish to address briefly four questions—by no means the only questions of the present moment—for which I think we need confessional answers and courageous bearers of the confessional message.\textsuperscript{21} These may be stated as follows:

\begin{itemize}
  \item How do we faithfully inhabit and use (or refuse to inhabit and use) online spaces?
  \item How do we confront the full range of barriers to Word and sacrament that accompany our every worship service, recognizing that the ultimate meaning of the Lord’s Supper is that we are incorporated into Christ and one another as an eternal community?
  \item How do we as a church body with many small, aging congregations struggling to make ends meet care for our members and proclaim Christ to the needy world?
  \item How can we be the church that is both local and global, recognizing that as the body of Christ local distinctions are significant—Christ was incarnate in a particular time, place, person, people—and transfigured in the unified diversity of the church?
\end{itemize}

The present debate over “virtual communion” feels like a Catch-22 to me. Declarations that the practice is commendable, inadvisable, forbidden, or what have you feel hasty because the church has hardly confronted the underlying questions surrounding community, access, or even the full meaning of the sacrament. To be sure, good things have been written on these topics, but the body of believers has not engaged in the sort of communal reflection that allows for a prompt and unified (hence coherent) response now that the crisis has come.\textsuperscript{22}

But if definitive proclamations seem hasty, the call to “take time and reflect” feels to me equally problematic. We must not wring hands that should be working or prove...
trepidatious in a moment that calls for sinning boldly. Catch-22 indeed.

An appropriate response can only spring from the truth of our doctrine and the Spirit of our faith confronting the crises of the moment with full honesty. Here I propose a few core “first principles” for conversation, action, and formation in the present moment drawn from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions:

First and foremost, the Lutheran church proclaims Jesus Christ as our redeemer; faith comes from hearing this Word and unites believers to Christ and to one another. Faith liberates us (i) from false gods and their offer of false security and salvation and (ii) from crushing, dehumanizing systems and ideologies that define our worth by criteria other than the following: that we are created, redeemed, and sanctified by God. Faith liberates us from prideful self-reliance and from the despair that we have no eternal caregiver or destiny.

Second, we do not choose to follow Jesus Christ; God claims us through the proclamation of Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit who gives the faith that unites us to Christ. So chosen, we as individuals and community proclaim Christ to the world.

Third, as community united to Christ, indeed the body of Christ on earth, the Church’s mission is twofold.

On the one hand, it is to feed and sustain those who are in the body. This feeding and sustaining happens through Word and Sacrament—through teaching the Law as a mirror of sin that un_masks prideful self-reliance, through proclaiming the Gospel that frees us from sin and despair, and through taking up the Law again with a new Spirit as a guide for life together and in the world.

On the other hand, the church’s mission is to proclaim the Word, to make the Word visible in the sacrament, to bring more people to Christ, just as Luther and the first Lutherans proclaimed rescue to Christians caught in a system that taught them to earn salvation and thus drove the faithful into despair or pride. Despair then and now says, “I can’t do it”; pride then and now says, “I can do it without Christ, and I am better than those others who have not done it.”

In every context, the church works to both sustain and proclaim—to create and cultivate faith (i.e., radical trust) in Christ alone as our rescue from all that ails us. Despair can take different forms in different contexts: Luther confronted the despair of Christians who worried that hell would be the reward for their unworthiness; many still face this despair. But there is also now the despair of many who cannot believe that there is any existence beyond this world, any meaning beyond the grim struggle for survival and dominance. Meanwhile, society marginalizes, abuses, neglects, and maligns individuals and groups, trying to strip away the hope that God is for them and their well-being—trying to sow despair. Pride also takes varied forms, but all who identify themselves or their community as specially favored by God as a reward for their virtue manifest a deep-seated pride that exalts self over other. Luther discerned in the monasticism of his day a deep-seated pride that found holiness in disentanglement from attending to the needs of others; forms of this temptation remain prevalent in the church today.

Fourth, apart from the right preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments according to the gospel, the structures, rules, and practices—including the worship practices—of the Lutheran church are regarded as adiaphora, meaning that we could do things differently if our particular situation demands it. Adiaphora are not unimportant, but things classified as adiaphora can be altered according to whatever most effectively brings people to faith in Christ. The decisive questions are (a) what best edifies the community and (b) how do we care for the weak in faith?

This understanding of adiaphora is one that allows the Lutheran church to respond to new challenges and new ages and to be at home in new contexts, perhaps even in electronically mediated ones. We can speak the language of the people, worship with the songs
of the people, organize congregations in ways that make sense to the people because all this is adiaphora. And we can adapt to global health measures as we nourish, sustain, and proclaim. Ultimately, we need to treasure the beautiful truth hidden behind the seemingly modest doctrine of adiaphora. The truth is that there has been throughout history and is still today an incredible diversity of people and cultural traditions in the world; the truth is that peoples and cultures change over time; the truth is that God wants all people who are called to Christ by the Holy Spirit to be people of Christ and of the Spirit in ways that are meaningful for them and that unleash their gifts for the church, for the world, and for history as it heads toward eternity.

In sum, through the proclamation of Christ in Word and Sacrament, the church liberates people from pride and despair, bringing them to radical trust in Christ; the church nourishes and sustains those within its bonds, and reaches out to those who have not yet heard; the church is able to feed its people as the ages change and the church is bold to proclaim Christ in ever new contexts because it understands itself to be joined to God through Christ as it acts in historical reality with all its wonderful diversity and change—change that is sometimes exhilarating, sometimes terrifying.

All of this means that the church in ministry can be bold. Luther did not wring his hands and fret over the old ways; his willingness to dismiss five sacraments and purgatory and the intercessory status of Mary and the saints and an array of theretofore exalted works (including pilgrimages) was not the result of a lack of religious earnestness but of a radical attentiveness to and trusting in the Word as the Word for his time. It required not just study of scripture but the courage to demand that scripture have answers for us. It required a spirituality of courage to seek answers and courage to live from them.

Lutheran spirituality is a spirituality of courage. Nowhere is this more evident than in Luther’s doctrine of prayer. United to Christ (God’s natural Son) by faith, we become God’s adopted children; we can approach God with assurance that God cares for our well-being; we can even complain and ask God to change God’s will, although in Luther’s view we ultimately must cling to the faith that God is for us even when things do not seem to go our way. The famous remark, “Sin boldly,” can only be spoken by those who know what the goal of the church’s work is (to sustain and proclaim) and who do not fear to adapt, to speak in new words, to worship in new ways, to speak of Christ where the despair seems too great or the pride too unbreakable.

Lutherans would do well to remember that Luther’s two catechisms belong to the Confessions—Luther’s catechisms were not mere statements of doctrine, they were written for use and study, at home and by the pastor. They were proclamation tailored to shape spirituality, and at the heart of that spirituality—the goal of it all—was confidence that God does not want us to fear. God does not want us to walk by a shallow pride in our own selves—a pride that always and inevitably collapses—or to live in the wake of such a collapse. God wants us to walk in the assurance of God’s love, care, redemption, and continuing sanctifying work as the Spirit binds us to Christ and one another.

5 | SOCIAL DISTANCING, ONLINE COMMUNION, AND STILL BIGGER QUESTIONS

Perhaps I will be judged at this point to have lost sight of coronavirus and related, immediate crises. Again, the question is not just how we confront social distancing measures and possible future virus surges and social–economic shutdowns, although all pertinent questions in this area need to be asked and answered in ways faithful to our belief and spirituality. Equally vital, we need to ask how we will care for and support all those congregations at home and abroad who are hard hit. But we need as well to confront vital and long-standing questions that the Covid-19 crisis has brought to the fore. We need to realize that the ground has been moving under us for some time; Covid-19 makes it move a little faster.

Regarding online communion and spaces, it strikes me as untenable to claim that the confessional requirement of celebration in gathered community is fulfilled only if people can physically touch but not if they can merely see and hear one another. How many senses must be involved for there to be genuine gathering? And what does this mean for those who do not have five senses at their disposal? The confessional principle was elaborated in the Reformation context against the view that the Eucharist was a repetition of Christ’s sacrifice, offered to God by the priest; this had led to the endowment of masses said for benefactors who did not need to be present or even alive to receive the benefits.

Luther insisted, on the contrary, that the Lord’s Supper is where Christ comes to us as gathered community. The sacrament is a visible world and Christ is present in usus through the power of the Word, because Christ’s promise of presence is completely reliable. To assume
that the Lutheran Confessions forbid a medium that the authors could not have imagined is to proceed without a reliable hermeneutic for bringing the Confessions into the present. Do we have to side with Melanchthon’s views on women or marriage? Likewise, it is inappropriate to discount online community without attending to the depth of inter-personal and sensory engagement that occurs there; those who feel no strong connection to online communion ought not make the decision for those that do, any more than the church in Pennsylvania ought to dictate worship traditions for the church in Namibia.

Does all this mean we should do communion online? I am certain that we should not condemn those who have done so and may continue to do so. We hold that Christ has commanded us to celebrate and given us words of institution. Other trappings, including the type of bread used or the time of celebration, are regarded as adiaphora. This does not mean that anything goes; rather, matters of bread selection and time of celebration are decided according to what edifies and serves the community. The bread must remind us of Christ’s body, for instance!

5.1 Considering the Weak in Faith

If we think with confessional teachings on adiaphora, the big question becomes the effect of our actions (whether innovation or the rejection of innovation) on the weak in faith. Weakness in faith means that one looks for help and salvation outside of Jesus Christ alone. It may be there are some who have learned to rely too much on weekly communion rather than on the Word made visible there; it may be that those unwilling to consider online worship and communion are also weak, clinging to outward trappings rather than the heart of it all. The point is—we are all weak, we all seek and receive nourishment in the church. But we must remember that the end of identifying weakness is not to condemn it, beat it out of others, and fashion our practices according to the wants of the strong. (When the strong demand this, they show themselves to be weak, Luther knew.)

In Wittenberg in the early 1520s, Luther argued that change to worship practices should be gradual in order to care for both those who were not ready for change and those too eager for change; he discerned that both groups had not yet been sufficiently convinced by preaching and teaching that Christ alone was their salvation. One group relied too much on old forms, the other too much on destruction of those forms.¹⁹ If there are those who make an idol of weekly communion, they may need to be fed for a time; if there are those who make an idol of one form of gathering and receiving, their resistance may need to be tolerated.

Beyond all the fruitless name calling, the real question may be whether the church ought to allow legitimate local variation or plead for unity and regard for the weak (all of us) around this most unifying of sacraments. After all, Lutheranism is heir to the creedal view that God created us for communion with God and one another and that this relationship involves the fullness of our individual persons and our concrete personal relations, apart from what is sinful. Now especially is the time to be proclaiming the hope of resurrection and life together with God; it is not the time to demand that people remain in Lent and remember their sins: more than 550,000 confirmed global deaths, more than 130,000 in the United States (as of July 2020), and the attendant political crises are reminder enough of the fall- enness and fragility of our life together. Whatever decision is made about online communion, we should be shouting from the rooftops about the benefits of the Eucharist—it is the rite that incorporates us into Christ and into one another as the body of Christ.

And as we decide about communion and move forward post-pandemic, we need to attend to both the sustaining and the growing of the church. Here again, any knee-jerk reaction that online community is “lesser” is unhelpful; we need to be as afraid of offending God’s expectations for mission as we are afraid of offending God’s expectations for community. The ELCA will be left behind by other denomina- tions should it fail to be in the online arena and use all of its tools. This does not even require an evaluation of the relative merits of “virtual” versus concretely gathered community; but we must not look to the internet simply as a means to get people through the “real” church doors on Sunday morning; we might rather take to some listening, to learn about what sort of community would inspire the internet crowd to physical participation. It may be that our times and places of worship do not attract. I have heard many stories of congregations that, in the time of Covid-19, posted worship and resources online only to find a far bigger audience than they ever welcome on Sunday morning. We should not fail to be excited about this! If we lack that excitement, or can offer only an invitation to attend “real” worship once it resumes, that reflects a focus on sustain- ing what we know and what is familiar to the neglect of missionizing in the hope of newness and growth.

That brings us then to the other issues noted above. So much of the debate around “virtual communion” has rightly centered on access: what of those who lack adequate internet connections, whether in rural Perry County, PA, or in the global church body? Let us turn this anxiety about access into a commitment to unifying Eucharistic mission—a commitment to access for diverse communities, a commitment to providing the means of grace to grocery workers and delivery drivers and medical professionals and all those who now labor through Sunday
morning to fulfill the needs and wants of others. 30 We should now strive for the full meaning of the sacrament of the altar as an incorporation into Christ and one another that includes our diverse selves but overcomes sin-driven barriers around class, race, sexuality, and so forth.

5.2 | The Courage of Deeper Communion

If we choose to abstain from online communion with one another now so that we may be in deeper communion with churches in South America, Africa, and Asia, well and good. But then let us go forth from Covid-19 as a church that listens to its global partners in the hopes of renewal and strengthened global bonds. This takes courage: it takes courage to hear the Law that we in the Northern World are implicated in histories of cruelty and in economic and political structures that continue to exploit and marginalize the majority world; it takes courage to hear that theologians in the majority world understand some things about justification and Christ and the Spirit that others fail to grasp; it takes courage to sing another’s song because we are one body of Christ. It can be an act of courage to abstain from a meal for the good of others; it is the opposite to use others as a cover for trepidation and inaction. We must know that Truth and Spirit are at stake. Through faith in Christ, we are brought to the spiritual courage—that lies on the other side of fragile pride, which perpetually frets about the maintenance of its paper-thin edifice, and despair of meaninglessness.

It may be that the most profound challenge posed by this pandemic to the Lutheran church and many other denominations in North America is not the immediate question of how to deal with social distancing measures nor even the very important question of how changes in worship and community practice now will shape worship and community long term. The longer the crisis lasts, the more likely it is that small congregations will fail—and even if they do not fail now, we are still heading to the place we have been heading for some time, to the demise of congregations that do not have the revenue to cover the costs.

We must be clear about what failing means: it does not mean failing to nourish and sustain members; it does mean, most likely, that opportunities for mission have been missed. After all, there are mission fields and needy people everywhere. All the same, the real and catastrophic failure may come now, in two ways.

First, if we lose the faith that Christ is even in the small rural congregation; second, if we choose the slow march to death over mission and new life—if we fail to see that the church without steepled buildings or even a permanent physical location looks a lot more like the missional church that Paul knew. The Son of Man has no place to lie his head. To step boldly into this world, we must cling to our Spirit of courage to sustain us and impel us to proclamation. Each member must see themselves as a witness to Christ and the gospel.

5.3 | Being the Body of Christ

The cross for Luther presented three images: first, the terrifying image of sin, death, damnation, and the devil; second, the image of sin, death, damnation, and the devil swallowed up by Christ’s righteousness and life; and third, the image of Christ’s example, of self-giving love to which believers are conformed. Honest about our sin and mortality, but joined to Christ in joyous faith, we walk with confidence both in God’s presence here and now and in our eternal destiny as community with God through Christ. Here there is courage to take up the cross. The decision to sell a building, to merge congregations, to shut down in order to divert resources elsewhere … these decisions are painful but approached with appropriate first principles, with the truth of what the church’s mission is and with a Spirit of courage, these decisions not only grow the church better, they sustain it better than staying the course. Spirit and Truth can bind us together in a great expansion of Christ’s table, confident that being the body of Christ in time and history means embracing change and embracing new mission fields.

Not one question dealt with in this short article was created by Covid-19, not even the question of online communion. Indeed, the biggest question is always the same: do we have Spirit and truth to be the body of Christ in the wondrous realm of history—of time, change, and diversity? We are chosen for this alone.

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ENDNOTES

1 The term “doctrine” refers to that which we teach; “spirituality” is understood here as, in part, a matter of internalizing and living out doctrine.

2 I appreciate and agree with the concern of my colleague, Dr. Kyle Schiefelbein-Guerrero, that the term “virtual” implies “unreal,” whereas spaces of online interaction are rather a different form of reality. When employing the term “virtual,” I accordingly place it in scare quotes. Using the term “online” to describe communion or community may have similar negative connotations, but it is used here to denote communion and community in a different location, mediated by different technology than that which facilitates in-person community. We must not forget that in-person interactions also rely on technological mediation (lights, sound systems, etc.). See Schiefelbein-Guerrero, K. K. (2020). Whether
one may flee from digital worship: Reflections on sacramental ministry in a public health crisis, Dialog (April 2020); https://doi.org/ulsem.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/dial.12549. (The essay is available via “Early View” and will appear in a forthcoming print issue.)

3 Consult the numerous references catalogued in the index of Kolb, R., & Wengert, T. J. (Eds.). (2000). The book of concord: The confessions of the evangelical Lutheran Church (pp. 717–718). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press; [henceforth BoC]; I refer to entries pertaining to the nature of faith as “trust in the promise of God,” “confidence in God’s grace,” and “confidence in God.”

4 Luther’s Magnificent Put into German and Explained reflects at length on the way faith changes our perception of God’s work in us and in history; LW 21: 297–358.

5 See especially Luther, M. (2015). The freedom of a Christian. In Wengert, T. J. (Ed.), The annotated Luther, volume 1: The roots of reform (pp. 519–531). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

6 See the blog posts Thompson, D. (2020, March 26). Christ is really present virtually: A proposal for virtual communion [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/03/christ-is-really-present-virtually-a-proposal-for-virtual-communion/; and Thompson, D. (2020, April 2). Being the body of Christ in a time of pandemic and beyond [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://wp.stolaf.edu/lutherancenter/2020/04/being-the-body-of-christ-in-a-time-of-pandemic-and-beyond/

7 BoC 40 (Article V of the Augsburg Confession); 319 (Smalcald Articles III.4).

8 I teach many classes online, and I often respond to skepticism about online education by underlining the depth of interaction that I witness in online discussion forums, when students are compelled to engage in detailed written exchange. At the same time, I have heard from “distance-learning” students that they long for togetherness with the rest of the seminary community; some remarked (in an online forum recently) that the isolation of the pandemic continued and intensified the distance they felt from the embodied seminary community. These experiences reflect a situation in which some people engage remotely with a community that is elsewhere embodied (on two campuses with residential and commuter populations). All that said, it seems best to describe online community as a different form of social engagement rather than as diminished social engagement. For instance, even when in the physical presence of someone, I might wish that they could take time to spell out their (interesting but unclear) thoughts for me, or I might wish that they be forced to pause before speaking. In a crowd, I might wish for the ordered conversation that Zoom can facilitate.

9 One example I have heard concerns single individuals who experience church as “only for families.”

10 See Boornstein, J. (2020, April 24). Church donations have plunged because of coronavirus. Some churches won’t survive, The Washington Post: “Some experts think the coronavirus could reshape the country’s religious landscape and wipe out many small houses of worship.” Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2020/04/24/church-budgets-coronavirus-debt/

11 A persuasive argument to this effect is offered by the Roman Catholic theologian, Tracy, D. (1994). On naming the present: God, hermeneutics, and Church (p. 18). Maryknoll: Orbis.

12 See recent reflections by Rittgers, R. K. (2020). Martin Luther helps us see divine love in pandemic suffering. Christianity Today. Retrieved from https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/may-web-only/martin-luther-coronavirus-black-plague-alien-work-of-god.html

13 The text may be found in Haemig, M. J. (Ed.). (2016). The annotated Luther, volume 4: Pastoral writings (pp. 385–410). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, with introduction and commentary by Anna Marie Johnson.

14 See, for example, many of the essays in Pero, A., & Moyo, A. (Eds.). (1988). Theology and the Black experience: The Lutheran heritage interpreted by African and African-American theologians. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House or Thompson, D. (2004). Crossing the divide: Luther, feminism, and the Cross. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

15 See the Constitutions, bylaws, and continuing resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2.05-07, p. 19. Retrieved from https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Repository/Constitutions_Bylaws_and_Continuing_Resolutions_of_the_ELCA.pdf?gamonbreakingspace= 2. 195789161. 434725669. 1590680894. 401694136. 1572891636

16 BoC 252.32 (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 23).

17 Sheldrake, P. (2014). Spirituality: A Guide for the Perplexed (p. 8). London: Bloomsbury.

18 One might wish to separate the realms of spirituality and ethics; although the distinction is helpful for analysis and conceptual clarity, it is an artificial one when dealing with Christian spiritual texts, which almost always deal with our relationship with God and others. For a helpful discussion, see Sheldrake (2014, pp. 60–61).

19 I address here specifically a Lutheran confessional audience; others will need a response shaped by their traditions for engaging scripture and the world.

20 Granted, a polity that allows local autonomy also affects the coherence of a church body’s response.

21 See Luther’s famous discussion of idolatry in his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, BoC 306.1f.: “A ‘god’ is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. . . Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”

22 For this sort of interpretation, see, for example, Maimela, S. S. (1988). Justification by faith and its continuing relevance for South Africa. In A. Pero & A. Moyo (Eds.), Theology and the Black Experience (pp. 35–41). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

23 In crafting their statement on predestination, the authors of the Formula of Concord (FC) underline God’s will to save all people through Christ; in conjunction with the Lutheran understanding of the “means of grace” that bring people to Christ by the work of the Spirit, the FC (Article 11) thus defines the missionary purpose of the church. BoC, 517–519; 640–656, especially 645.27–645.30, 650.65–651.69.

24 BoC 515.4–515.5 (FC 10, here cited in the Epitome); for a helpful discussion of the origin of this teaching and its practical application in introducing change to the parish, see Wengert, T. J. (2006). A formula for parish practice: Using the formula of concord in congregations (pp. 165–179), Lutheran Quarterly Books. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
The same may be said broadly of the spirituality of reform/reformers, but I do not pursue that idea here.

For a helpful discussion, see Haemig, M. J. (2009). Prayer as talking back to God in Luther’s Genesis Lectures. Lutheran Quarterly, 23(3), 270–295.

The other texts in the Book of Concord equally had faith and hence individual and corporate spirituality as their end: The Augsburg Confession, Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Smalcald Articles, and Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope professed the doctrine on which the church must stand; the later Formula of Concord sought to clarify that doctrine for Lutheran preaching and teaching, with constant attention to pastoral use and effect. On the pastoral intent and current application of the Formula, see again Wengert, A Formula for Parish Practice.

This is especially evident in Luther’s exegesis of the Lord’s Prayer: BoC 356–358, 440–456. “With these words ['Our Father, you who are in heaven'] God wants to entice us, so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving children ask their loving father.”

See the “Invocavit Sermons,” aka “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg,” LW 51: 70–100.

It is equally necessary to work and advocate for a real Sabbath for all people.

Luther stated these ideas succinctly in his “A Meditation on Christ’s Passion” (1519), LW 42:7–14; they shaped his preaching on the passion throughout his career—indeed, they shaped a rich tradition of Lutheran preaching and teaching on the passion. See Kolb, R. (1996). Passionsmeditation: Luthers und Melanchthons Schüler predigen und beten die Passion. In M. Beyer & G. Wartenberg (Eds.) Humanismus und Wittenberger Reformation (pp. 267–293). Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

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