Overcoming Digital Division:
Digital Sacramentality as a Source of Healing
Ryan Panzer

Abstract

The flattening of our personal identities in cyberspace, otherwise known as "context collapse," is a challenge of online social engagement that God calls church leaders to address. At its best, online technology facilitates connection, collaboration, and care. At its worst, online technology gives rise to vitriol, division, and fear. If church leaders want to show Christians how to be more Christ-like in digital spaces, then church leaders must work to facilitate postures and practices of sacramentality. Through education, practice, and ritual, we can learn to see the whole person on the other side of the screen. Central to these practices is the virtual, communal celebration of the eucharist. If done well, gathering a digital community to celebrate the Lord's Supper affirms the intrinsic, God-given significance of our digital identities and rebinds divided communities.

For years, Snapchat has been among my favorite smartphone apps. Using Snapchat, I can exchange brief videos, mostly of my cat's frenetic escapades, with friends and family, an experience that is made all the more comical by the brevity and lack of long-term accessibility of the videos. (Snapchat deletes all videos and images immediately after viewing.) These features have made Snapchat into one of the Web's most widely used messaging platforms,

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reaching just under eighty percent of American Internet users.[1] Seventy percent of American teenagers send and receive messages with Snapchat.[2] Still, Snapchat is far from a perfect platform. Snapchat's impermanence and lack of supporting context facilitate fun and airy communication while also creating a platform for cyberbullying, aggression, and fighting. Among youth, Snapchat is one of the Internet's three busiest platforms for incidents of cyberbullying, an often-unseen form of marginalization that affects one in every five teenagers.[3]

The way Snapchat is used, for pithy and humorous messaging, and for scorn and mockery, speaks to Martin Luther's suggestion that each of us is simultaneously saint and sinner. Despite the recent flurry of cultural commentary over the extent to which digital platforms are shaping our culture in undesirable ways that we do not fully comprehend, we might say with some objectivity that our digital ecosystem is neither exclusively good nor exclusively bad. Rather, it is a morally neutral environment into which we can bring our best selves and our worst selves. It is an environment in which we can empathetically see those on the other side of the screen as created in the image of God, or we can dismiss those on the other side of the screen as decontextualized and insignificant, reducing their identity to a screen name or an avatar. It is an environment capable of creating the strongest connections and the deepest divisions. This is a challenge to which church leaders in tech-shaped culture should respond. God is calling the church to step into digital spaces, increasingly the domain of dismissiveness if not dehumanization, to demonstrate what it looks like to be more Christ-like. Through proclamation, education, and ritual, church

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[1] "Snapchat Statistics and Revenue: Snapchat by the Numbers," Influencer Marketing Hub (April 30, 2019), https://influencermarketinghub.com/snapchat-statistics-revenue/.
[2] Sara Harrison, "Teen Love for Snapchat Is Keeping Snap Afloat," *Wired* (July 23, 2019), https://www.wired.com/story/teen-love-snapchat-keeping-snap-afloat/.
[3] Hillary K. Grigonis, "1 In 5 Teenagers Are Bullied Online, New Cyberbullying Statistics Suggest," *Digital Trends* (July 22, 2017), https://www.digitaltrends.com/social-media/cyberbullying-statistics-2017-ditch-the-label/.

leaders can foster a sense of online sacramentality, through which we manifest God's love, mercy, and forgiveness in and through digital connection.

The Challenge of Context Collapse

Understanding the call of the religious leader in the digital age necessitates an understanding of context collapse, the phenomenon underscoring many of the communicative challenges within tech-shaped culture. As a problem unique to digital forms of communication, context collapse can be understood in contrast to face-to-face interaction. With in-person communications, we draw on rich contextual cues (body language, tone of voice, and group dynamics, to name a few) in determining how best to communicate. Such contextual cues influence not just our communication but also our interpretation. Although "emotions, attitudes, and feelings" make interpretation more complex,[4] nonverbal factors account for as little as fifty-five percent and as much as ninety-three percent of how we interpret a message.[5] Boundedness and limits are also key to understanding in-person communication. When we communicate person to person, we regularly communicate to a group that is small enough that we can tailor our communication to the norms and expectations of those nearest to us. Thus, face-to-face interactions are modulated by and molded to the unique characteristics of a specific audience.

But digital communications like e-mail lack contextual cues, and in the case of social media, a sense of bounded or limited community. When we post to social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, or send a text-based e-mail, it is not always immediately clear who will read or interpret our messages. Though we might try to empathize with our audience, digital communication precludes

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[4] George W. Porter, "Non-Verbal Communications," *Training & Development Journal* 23(7) (1969): 52, https://search-ebscohost-com.luthersem.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=7465450&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[5] Ashley Hamer, "Is Communication Really 80 Percent Nonverbal?", Curiosity.com (November 13, 2017), https://curiosity.com/topics/is-communication-really-80-percent-nonverbal-curiosity/.

a clear awareness of the norms, expectations, and values of those who will view our messages. And as a message recipient, digital communication comes to us devoid of the interpretive cues that are so useful in face-to-face interaction. These are the foundations of context collapse.

According to a 2018 study from *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, "Context collapse occurs when disparate audiences are conjoined into one, creating potentially uncomfortable situations when users broadcast messages to an entire social network with different appropriateness norms across diverse groups."[6] Context collapse is thus a process of reduction, in which digital environments "flatten" multiple distinct identities into an oversimplified form.[7] This flattening is the result of the tension that arises when "multiple social settings come together in the same online space."[8]

Context collapse is a form of mental shortcut. The overwhelming volume of information involved in digital communication, including the vastness of our audience, when combined with the relative lack of contextual cues in digital environments, facilitates rapid, implicit judgments about a situation. The rapidity of these judgments allows us to move quickly through digital spaces, yet it also inhibits our ability to empathize with those on the other side of the screen. While online, it seems that we Tweet first and ask questions never.

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[6] Teresa Gil-Lopez, Cuihua Shen, Grace A. Benefield, Nicholas A. Palomares, Michal Kosinski, and David Stillwell, "One Size Fits All: Context Collapse, Self-Presentation Strategies and Language Styles on Facebook," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 23(3) (June 2018): 127–45, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmy006.

[7] Jessica Vitak, Cliff Lampe, Rebecca Gray, and Nicole B. Ellisson, "'Why Won't You Be My Facebook Friend?': Strategies for Managing Context Collapse in the Workplace," Paper presented at iConference '12, Toronto, Ontario (2012): 555–557, ACM: New York.

[8] Vanessa P. Dennen and Kerry J. Burner, "Identity, Context Collapse, and Facebook Use in Higher Education: Putting Presence and Privacy at Odds," *Distance Education* 38(2) (2017): 173–92, https://doi:10.1080./01587919.2017.1322453.

With about two hundred Twitter followers, I am unable to consider the appropriate way to interact with each of them every time I post on the micro-blogging platform. And because Twitter is a public, social media platform, I cannot possibly consider who beyond my truncated follower list will view my posts—how they might interpret my thoughts, and how I might be viewed as a result. Without cues like nonverbal communication and tone of voice, context collapse forces us to imagine the motives and intentions of those who post online.[9] Such imagined interpretations, combined with the ease of online anonymity on profiles like YouTube and Twitter, can lead to misunderstanding at best, and shaming, aggression, and ostracism at worst.

To visualize the challenge posed by context collapse, consider a large workplace team working together to write a report. Prior to the digital age, the coworkers met face to face to prepare the report. One coworker, eager to make an impact and excited by the high quality of the second coworker's effort, exclaims, "I need to see more!" A warmly vocalized comment affirms, encourages, and ultimately deepens their collaboration. But in tech-shaped culture, it is likely that this team is collaborating on that same report with an online word-processing document. That same coworker, still impressed by the effort of his or her colleagues, rapidly leaves a text comment: "I need to see more!" The coworkers, unable to hear the tone of voice or view any body language, interprets the comment as critical and even condescending. The team mistakenly decides that their colleague must be rude, dismissive, and maybe even a little arrogant. Their collaboration, and their broader relationship, soon deteriorates.

Although such an example has fairly mundane consequences, context collapse can quickly escalate into a more troubling phenomenon. Digital tools provide unfiltered and anonymized platforms that embolden some to verbalize sentiments that they

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[9] Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd, "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience," *New Media & Society* 13(1) (February 2011): 114-33, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313.

might never express in face-to-face conversation. Social media's intrinsic lack of accountability leads directly to incidents of trolling. These anonymized trolls are particularly intent on targeting people of color. One study of three hundred forty adolescents of color found that fifty-eight percent had experienced a direct discriminatory incident online over the course of one year.[10] Concerned with the rise of overt racism and hate speech on their platforms, social media companies have recently started to invest millions of dollars in automated content screening, as well as human moderation.[11]

Unfortunately, no technology exists that can save digital platforms from these tendencies toward toxicity. Though technology companies might try, cyber-bullying, dehumanization, and hate speech are sins that cannot be exclusively addressed by technological solutions. Because context collapse is caused by a moral application of technology, it can be only partially addressed by the providers of the technology. Context also must be addressed by the people who use such platforms. As simultaneously sinful and saintly users of digital platforms, we need to relearn to be communal, to be divinely relational, and to be Christ-like. We need religious leaders capable of guiding our communities to bring less of the former and more of the latter identity into online interactions. We need religious leaders who can bridge the divides and rebind what has been separated.

A Time for Rebinding

Religious leaders in tech-shaped culture ought to bridge the cultural divides caused by context collapse. Rebinding our fractured, tech-shaped culture is a pastoral call to which all religious leaders, both lay and ordained, are called.

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[10] Brendesha M. Tynes, "Online Racial Discrimination: A Growing Problem for Adolescents," American Psychological Association, December 2015, https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2015/12/online-racial-discrimination.
[11] Robinson Meyer, "Twitter's Famous Racist Problem: The Social Network Risks Losing the Goodwill It Built up During the Arab Spring," *The Atlantic* (July 21, 2016), https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/07/twitter-swings-the-mighty-ban-hammer/492209/.

This is an especially important task in an increasingly secular age, where religious affiliation and spiritual practice diverge. As a millennial, most of my friends identify as "spiritual, but not religious." However, research has shown that the majority of religious "Nones," a category that describes just under one-third of millennials, pray and read Scripture at the same rate as the religiously affiliated.[12] At times, these friends ask me about the purpose of church attendance or religious affiliation. Why be religious, they ask, when one can pursue the spiritual life on their own terms? Indeed, this is an important question.

When asked such a question, I find myself returning to the idea that religion, and religious leadership, is about rebinding, or the act of bringing together during times of division. The word *religion* has its roots in the Latin *religare*, meaning to "bind fast."[13] An understanding of religion as that which rebinds us to one another and connects us to the divine is particularly appealing in this time of context collapse. Accordingly, such an understanding seems to be growing in popularity. As a small-group guide for youth Confirmation programming, I have observed instructors drawing upon this idea when explaining to an inquisitive youth the value and importance of religion in tech-shaped culture. The youth, accustomed to the challenges of navigating the social media landscape, appear to appreciate such an explanation. While one can pray, read the Bible, and believe in God on one's own, the church offers an opportunity to restore communities in a way that no individual can effect through their own effort, and in a way that no blog post, podcast, or YouTube video can provide.

Religious leaders of tech-shaped culture, both lay and ordained, should sense a pastoral call to extend grace into environments of context collapse. Our shared conviction that we are all created in the image of God should be a more powerful deterrent to unsavory online behavior than any algorithm. Our shared calling to proclaim God's healing and liberating Word ought to nudge us into virtual

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[12] Keith R. Anderson, *The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World,* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), xii.

[13] "Religion (n.)." Index, Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed January 6, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/religion.

environments so clearly in need of restoration. Those living in a tech-shaped culture require religious leaders who can exude postures and demonstrate practices of rebinding for the healing of a fractured culture. Three practices that are fundamental to Christian life together will contribute to this rebinding. The first is to preach about how salvation through Jesus Christ should be made manifest in our online life together. The second practice is to educate about how we can be more Christ-like online through empathy and advocacy. The third practice, celebrating the Eucharist in digital contexts, solidifies our understanding that, reconciled to God, we ought to be a reconciling presence in digital spaces.

Rebinding Through Preaching

We no longer "go online." It would instead be more accurate to say that we live online. According to PC Magazine, the average adult now spends an average of just less than six hours each day connected to the Internet, a figure that is likely much higher among younger generations.[14] Despite so much of our life together taking place on digital devices, I have yet to hear a sermon preached on what it means to follow Christ in digital spaces, on how to be Christ-like online, or on what it means to experience the grace of God in virtual contexts. The most consistent message on digital engagement that church leaders deliver is a reminder to silence one's phone (as in an announcement at the start of a music program or even an occasional worship service) or to keep one's phone put away entirely (as in a youth group meeting or Confirmation class).

In many faith traditions, preaching involves the illumination of God at work within contemporary realities. If the preaching in the Christian tradition is to continue to identify the grace of God amidst our life together, our proclamation must speak to where much of those contemporary realities are experienced: in online spaces. Engaging our online life through preaching together begins with hermeneutics. We might not need to change our methods

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[14] Rob Marvin, "Tech Addiction by the Numbers: How Much Time We Spend Online," *PC Magazine* (June 11, 2018), https://www.pcmag.com/article/361587/tech-addiction-by-the-numbers-how-much-time-we-spend-online.

of interpretation, but we should consider how our most salient methodologies for interpreting, responding to, and applying the lessons of the Scriptures intersect with the problems of context collapse and the resulting dehumanization of the other.

As a Lutheran, the hermeneutic with which I am most familiar is law and Gospel.[15] With this lens, a preacher explores how a Biblical text speaks a simultaneous word of judgment and salvation. Just as Martin Luther understood us to be saint and sinner simultaneously, he understood Scripture to reveal simultaneously where we need salvation and how God through Christ is doing the work of saving. Applying this hermeneutic to our culture of context collapse, a preacher might speak a word of judgment to our online life together, just as the preacher proclaims a promise of how the grace of Christ can save our fractured communities.

While writing this essay, the Christmas season came and went, and the liturgical calendar turned to Epiphany. As I sat in the pews of a church that utilizes the Revised Common Lectionary, I heard Matthew 2:1–12, the story of Herod and the wise men from the East. I could not help but think about the applicability of this text to our current cultural moment. In this reading, three individuals chose "another road," despite knowing that their decision contradicted the cultural powers of their time. I began to consider who the Herods are in our digital contexts—the alluring forces that, for the sake of their own benefit, scheme against us. Perhaps the Herods in tech-shaped culture could symbolize the addicting applications that promise to connect us, the companies that commodify our attention, while subsequently causing us to speak and act without regard for those on the other side of the screen. While reflecting on the reading, I also wondered what it would mean for us to be wise, to seek another road in the digital community, one that turns away from Herod and leads toward the baby in the manger. In an environment in which messages are flung

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[15] Kathryn Kleinhans, , "Lutheranism 101: Culture or Confession?", Living Lutheran, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (July 12, 2018), https://www.livinglutheran.org/2007/05/lutheranism-101/.

across the Web with rapidity and disregard for the neighbor, maybe that proverbial "other road" is about awareness and disciplined action. The awareness comes from the realization that Christ's grace expands even into online spaces. The disciplined action, which comes as a response, is defined by the cultivation of an intentional response, something we achieve by pausing, considering how our messages will be received, empathizing with the way others will interpret our words, or perhaps deciding not to post at all.

Our life together in digital contexts can be engaged no matter one's hermeneutic. Preaching about being Christ-like in digital spaces does not require us to change our lens. It simply asks us to point that lens toward our shared, tech-shaped culture. Because we spend one out of every four hours connected to the Web, perhaps one out of every four sermons might inhabit online space to engage the question of what it means to rebind in a time of digital division. Preachers should name the aspects of tech-shaped culture that force us away from Christ, while proclaiming how the grace of God offers another road for the church to follow. Such preaching will reorient church communities to spread encouragement, to comfort, to critique lovingly, and to empathize with the least and lost while online. But proclamation from the pulpit is merely the first of three methods by which a religious leader might address context collapse. To be more Christ-like online, we need more than sermons—we also need active and constructive learning experiences that move us into concrete practices of empathy and advocacy.

Rebinding Through Education and Faith Formation

It would be ineffective to simply tell Christian communities to be more Christ-like while online or to engage this task exclusively at an intellectual level. Our online life together moves at a rapid velocity that often inhibits conscious reflection. As a result, we must be equipped with the means of being Christ-like in digital spaces. This ought to be a central focus of Christian faith formation efforts. The religious leaders of tech-shaped culture should teach their communities about the realities of context collapse and the problems of dehumanization in cyberspace. This is more than teaching manners or encouraging good behavior online. Education

and faith formation should consistently engage the contradiction between the *imago dei* and the challenge of engaging the whole person on the other side of the screen. With forty-one percent of eight- to twelve-year-olds using a smartphone,[16] as well as eighty percent of seniors ages sixty-five and older,[17] encountering gracefully the whole person on the other side of the screen is a challenge for us all.

The task of the Christian educator is to create an environment in which learners can understand the often subtle, if not invisible, problems of context collapse, and to experiment with the practical ways people can be more Christ-like in digital environments. When we gather for faith formation, we should think of our space as a laboratory for spiritual practice, one that provides more opportunity for active experience than for passive listening. Sunday school, youth groups, Confirmation, and adult education should facilitate reflection on what it means to live with the tension that comes from being created in God's image and inhabiting a digital ecosystem that flattens the richness, complexity, and diversity of that image.

Teaching such a curriculum begins with helping the community to deeply intuit what it means to be created in the beautiful diversity of God's image. The next step is to contrast such an anthropology with prevailing cultural norms, raising awareness of the challenge of living within a culture that seeks to flatten the complexity of our identity. It concludes by coaching Christian communities toward concrete practices for overcoming digital division using empathy, advocacy, and prayer. To move from the theory of context collapse into the practice of empathy and advocacy, religious educators should consider how to raise awareness of the rapidity of our actions in digital spaces, particularly social media platforms. As a

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[16] Natasha Pinon, "A Majority of Kids Have Smartphones by Middle School, Study Finds," *Mashable* (October 29, 2019), https://mashable.com/article/teen-smartphone-usage/.

[17] Monica Anderson and Andrew Perrin, "Technology Use Among Seniors," Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech (May 17, 2017), https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/17/technology-use-among-seniors/.

supporting exercise, the educator could provide three minutes to scroll through a social media feed at a normal pace, counting the number of posts along the way. Next, explain how context collapse derives, in part, from our tendency to move too fast through such environments. Encourage participants to spend three more minutes moving intentionally through their feed, reflecting on each post they encounter with two questions: What is really taking place here? How might I be present as an affirming and supportive resource? Conclude the exercise by providing a few silent moments for participants to pray for the needs of those with whom they have engaged in this exercise. Such an exercise recontextualizes the digital environment and establishes a new pattern that can become integrated and ingrained as habitual.

Another important exercise in this pedagogy is to juxtapose traditional Christian practice with online resources. If we can develop more familiarity with using the Internet to experience and extend the grace of God, we will begin to see the Internet as a vehicle for the extension of grace into the world. As we experience this grace through online resources, we will become naturally more fluent in forgiveness, compassion, and grace to those on the other side of the screen.

To facilitate this fluency, pastors, priests, and lay leaders should be active curators and creators of content that promotes habits of online spiritual practice: prayer and Scripture reading, meditation and devotion, contemplation and reflection.[18] Today's pastor has a responsibility to facilitate these practices through the use of borrowed or original apps, blogs, digital video, online audio, and social media. We should all be critical consumers and creative producers of online content that supports spiritual practice, aware of what such content will move us to do and why the content was produced in the first place. It is possible that some of the best apps, tools, and resources will not come from what are traditionally

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[18] A curator is one who intentionally collects, organizes, and shares contextually relevant resources that others have built. These resources are often used for some form of learning or development. This is a contrast to a creator, who designs, develops, and shares resources that he or she has built.

thought of as Christian resources. As an example, I begin each day with "The Daily Calm," a ten-minute meditation on the Calm app. Though the app is a secular resource, I find that ten minutes of meditation provides a seamless transition into some reflective Scripture reading, facilitated by Luther Seminary's daily God Pause e-mail devotional, and prayer.[19] I initiated this daily practice at the recommendation of a fellow seminarian, who begins the day similarly. Thus, at the core of this pedagogy is a resolve to promote habitual spiritual practices that move us into deeper relationality with Christ and with one another.

Rebinding Through Eucharist

If we are to learn to rebind a tech-shaped culture that has fractured under context collapse, we must do more than teach about a problem and recommend resources for spiritual practice. We must especially resolve to do something more significant, given what waits on the other side of this year's calendar. Through online trolling, bullying, and harassment, our digital divisions will only intensify as the fractious 2020 U.S. presidential election continues.[20] Fueled by the flattening of complex identities into oversimplified reductions, figures on both the political left and right will revert to name-calling and labeling. Voices across the political spectrum

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[19] I recommend several online resources for spiritual practice. For daily Scripture readings, including brief reflections from Christian leaders around the world, I recommend Luther Seminary's "God Pause" eDevotional, a daily e-mail newsletter. For daily reflections on what it means to live the Christian life in this cultural moment, I recommend Richard Rohr's daily meditation newsletter. For meditation and contemplation, I have yet to find a Christian resource that is as compelling and useful as Calm. Other Christian leaders I know of use the 10% Happier app, co-created by Good Morning America's Dan Harris. Finally, countless blogs and podcasts about faith and spirituality are produced. As a millennial who socializes in largely unchurched circles, I find myself drawn to the work of The Liturgists and Rob Bell's Robcast. But whatever resources one uses, I believe it is incumbent upon today's Christian leader to share those resources with their circles, spreading awareness of their utility in helping us to be more Christ-like while online.

[20] Emma Green, "Make Trolling Great Again," *The Atlantic* (September 14, 2016), https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/09/make-trolling-great-again/499523/.

will inevitably come to dehumanize those "on the other side" and the issues they stand for—I would know, because I have at times caught myself uncharacteristically Tweeting condescending and aggressive comments around election cycles, contributing to the divisiveness that this essay attempts to remedy. Ironically, most of my Twitter feed is comprised of pastors, church leaders, and seminarians, a group I find to be among the most aggressive and acrimonious on social media come election time.

In this fractious environment, both Christian leaders and disciples can make a decisive statement about the intrinsic value and God-given goodness of our online selves, while engaging that goodness in communal practice. Such an activity could be incarnated through the virtual celebration of the Eucharist.

The Lord's Supper celebrated virtually has recently become a subject of debate in certain Christian communities and has emerged as a novel controversy among some Christian leaders.[21] Some mainline Protestant ministries have decided against the online Eucharist. Epiphany Island, an entirely digital Anglican Cathedral built on the virtual reality platform Second Life, decided in consultation with various bishops that it is not possible to celebrate the Eucharist online because of the lack of something "personal, human, and physical."[22] Some Catholic leaders also have rejected the notion of online communion, noting that online community fails to constitute an embodied environment in which the Lord's Supper can be celebrated.[23] Conversely, other pockets of mainline Protestant ministries,[24] as well as some evangelical Protestant congregations such as Saddleback Church, have created a provision for taking communion online during live-streamed worship services. Saddleback saw an opportunity to augment their online worship experience through online communion as an expression of

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[21] Lisa Miller, "Beliefwatch: Communion Online," Newsweek (March 14, 2010), https://www.newsweek.com/beliefwatch-communion-online-91993.
[22] "Sacraments on Epiphany Island," The Anglican Cathedral of Second Life (September 24, 2019), https://slangcath.wordpress.com/the-vision/sacraments-on-epiphany-island/.
[23] Miller, "Beliefwatch."
[24] Miller, "Beliefwatch."

Christ's "new covenant." [25] Still, Saddleback's expression of online communion as practiced is merely an extension of a face-to-face worship service occurring simultaneously, and is not a purely digital celebration of the Eucharist.

Wherever one stands in this debate, all Christian leaders share a belief that the Eucharist holds something of the infinite God in the finitude and limitation of bread and wine. When we, the broken vessels that we are, follow Christ's command to take and eat, we partake in God's boundless and ongoing work of salvation through means that are, as well, both bounded and temporal. As it turns out, these limits are inherent to the ritual. We partake in Christ's testament within a physical space that limits the number of people who can join for the meal. We celebrate the Eucharist at specific times on specific dates, availing the feast to those whose schedules happen to align with our own. On Sunday mornings, some of us receive the gifts of bread and wine after walking up steps, proceeding down aisles, kneeling at railings, and reaching out to take and eat—physical actions that are accessible only to those who are able-bodied to a specific extent. We who are physically, mentally, and spiritually able to be in this one place take the bread, which goes stale, and drink the wine, which goes sour, from plates that crack and chalices that shatter in halls where moths and rust consume. Still, God is present at this table. Despite the limits of this ritual, we receive a blessing that is limitless. And *that* is a crucial message for our achievement-obsessed culture: that God comes to us not because of our merit, but through our very imperfections, that God blesses us not through our strength but through our frailty.

Perhaps we have stopped short of gathering together to digitally celebrate the Eucharist because we imagine a Google Hangout, a Zoom call, or a Facebook Messenger group to be too much of a limitation on the means of grace. It could be that we do not use technology to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Tuesday afternoons

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[25] "Take Communion Online with Us," Saddleback Church: Internet Campus (January 24, 2014), https://saddleback.com/archive/blog-internet-campus-2014/01/24/take-communion-online-with-us.

between meetings, or on Saturday mornings after kid's soccer games, because to do so would implicitly diminish some of the prestige and majesty associated with communion. Although the ritual of the Eucharist implies limitation via the elements of bread and wine, computer screens impose another degree of limitation that some are unwilling to consider. Though a digital observation of the Eucharist would open up access to the Lord's Supper to more than those who can gather with us in the limits of our Sunday gatherings, such an observation incorporates limits that appear too overwhelming when coupled with the limits already intrinsic to the celebration. In this sense, limitations associated with digital Eucharist are different in degree but not in kind from the limitations of the in-person ritual.

But the work of rebinding in this cultural environment is not about prestige, and the healing power of the Eucharist is not about majesty. I support online practices—to the extent they are theologically and ecclesiologically well-ordered—of the sacrament because the Lord's Supper reveals the love and mercy of a limitless God to the intrinsically limited communities in which we gather. Virtual forms of togetherness are merely another variant of the many forms of limitation in which we take communion, and virtual forms of togetherness are increasingly normative in this tech-shaped culture.

I concur with Augustine's simple understanding of sacrament: a "visible form of an invisible grace."[26] In contrast to the mystery and magnitude of grace, this ritual will seem simple, limited, and even reductive, whether the ritual is performed online or in person. An entirely virtual celebration of the Eucharist merits consideration because it provides the visible forms, grants a foretaste of the invisible grace, and offers the potential for practices of powerful rebinding. Provided we are gathered in community through a digital tool that facilitates synchronous togetherness, we could celebrate communion on computers.

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[26] Edwin Oliver James, "Sacrament," Encyclopedia Britannica, (May 27, 2013), https://www.britannica.com/topic/sacrament.

Celebrating the Feast

Granted that our celebration is well-ordered with the words of institution and access to the proper elements, we could gather electronically to eat and drink. When we begin to do so, we might find that we affirm the fullness with which the image of God graces our online identities in all their complexity. When we begin to do so, we will proclaim that every bit of God's restorative and liberating power extends into cyberspace. So the task of the Christian leader in the digital age might not just be to preach, to teach, and to promote practices that rebind in a time of digital division. The task of such a leader is to bring the means of grace online, so that we may come to be more gracious while online. The result of this will be the reanimation of flattened identities, the rebinding of divided communities, and the healing of a world living online.

What, then, might a virtual celebration of the Eucharist entail? Let us consider four essential elements: those of gathering together, sacred space, elements, and sending forth. The examples discussed below are meant as stimulation of our theologically informed and liturgically attuned creativity, the purpose of which is to practice the communion of the Eucharist as fully as the limitations of the online context allow, acknowledging that all sacramental practices are limited, fallible, and fall far short of God's glory.

> **Gathering.** For some to say that digital Eucharist lacks the necessary element of gathering in community is a dismissal of what it means to gather in a digital age. Our life together has moved into digital spaces, a movement that is supported by rich messaging technologies that allow us to move more of our full selves into the conversation. Gathering together on tools like FaceTime and Zoom is an expression of authentic community, as it creates an opportunity for those who otherwise might not attend a Sunday service. Virtual Eucharist is inclusive of those who are disabled, those who have experienced past trauma in the church, those who work on Sundays, those who are

traveling, and those who simply would like to partake in the meal at different dates and times.

I suggest three principles for gathering together online for the Eucharist. First, embrace the public character of Christian worship by gathering in a publicly accessible and accountable setting. It should be clear when (date/time) a community will observe the Eucharist in a virtual setting, how it will do so (dial-in link), and who can assist should someone have difficulty accessing the gathering. Second, such gatherings should be consistent, at a repeated interval that provides a consistent semblance of Sabbath in the routines of our week. Whether that gathering is a Monday morning at six or a Friday night at midnight is not as important as offering a consistent time that aligns to the rhythms of the community. Third, such gatherings should provide space for shared leadership. While an ordained or synodically authorized minister ought to consecrate the elements, community members ought to partake in the ceremony as they would an in-person worship service. All community members should have the opportunity to participate, offering up readings, prayers, and blessings.

Sacred Space. I recently attended an "eFormation" professional development event with Virginia Theological Seminary. The event included a day's worth of presentations, workshops, and worship, all facilitated via Zoom videoconferencing. At the start of the day, workshop leader Sarah Stonesifer invited all who were gathered to mark their secular learning space (a conference room, a kitchen table, a backyard) as sacred through a brief liturgy and shared prayer. Following the prayer, participants were invited to post a picture to Twitter of their secular space turned to sacred space for learning with the hashtag #sacredspace.

When we celebrate the Eucharist online, we do not need to use sophisticated home altars, but we would do well to recognize the sanctity of the space around us. Digital expressions of the Eucharist should mark the sacredness of the space through simple and inclusive prayer and blessing. When we gather in a video-messaging application to celebrate the Eucharist, we gather around a sacred table that extends through cyberspace, connecting those who have gathered together at that particular moment. Through a brief prayer, the liturgist facilitates the conversion of one's sacred space into the altar, a limited space that is ready to receive the Eucharist. Something even as simple as an invocation to bless the spaces around us, wherever we are gathered, would suffice. Participants could even share where they have joined in the celebration, so as to verbally acknowledge that the communion rail runs through their desk, their dashboard, or their doorstep.

Elements. Though the gathering is virtual, we still take, eat, and drink real bread and real wine. The digital-age minister should see to it that all who are gathered have bread (or wafers) and wine (or grape juice). Churches that celebrate a virtual Eucharist could distribute the elements in the lobby of their church building for home use—similar to the process that ministers use for home communion visits, but perhaps at a broader scale. Those gathered may, of course, provide their own elements. Whether wafers and grape juice are distributed via U.S. Mail or bread and wine are handed out in the church office, it is the task of the religious leader to increase the accessibility of the elements so that all who feel so called may join in the celebration.

Sending Forth. After the presiding minister says the Words of Institution, all eat and drink together. The observation ends with a sending and a blessing, a liturgical reminder that all our spaces are sacred, and

that God dwells within us despite our limits. And key to the concern of rebinding in a time of context collapse, we are sent with a tangible experience of God's grace in the digital community. We depart having tasted grace and forgiveness online—we go, then, and do likewise.

Conclusion

Religious leaders often lament that digital technologies are weakening our communities, that kids are too addicted to their phones, and that youth would rather experience virtual fun than the joy of face-to-face community. Religious leaders of the digital age would do well to provide experiences of digital Sabbath, in which we can all unplug from the frenetic pace of our online life together.

But the call of today's religious leader is about more than unplugging. This call demands more than simply silencing our devices. In this tech-shaped culture, we all need to learn to be more Christ-like in our online interactions. In this time of context collapse, we need to remember to live into fuller expressions of community, as the concept of community becomes exceedingly integrated with social media and other forms of digital technology. Through preaching about Christ's presence in our online life together; by teaching new, faithful ways to inhabit the digital community; and by administering the Eucharist online, today's digital minister makes disciples of digital nations—and virtual generations.

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