

CONDUCTING CHURCH CEREMONIES IN EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE BIBLICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The situation prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the efforts to reduce the risk of infection as expressed through physical distancing and other safety precautions has posed new challenges to the church, not only in regard to conducting religious services but also certain ceremonies of the church, such as the ordinances of baptism and communion, as well as weddings. This brief document is the product of thoughtful reflection by BRI scholars in response to three main questions received from various parts of the world.

Can a “virtual” baptismal service be conducted during the current lockdown? Can a pastor keep physical separation by praying from a distance and allowing the baptismal candidate to immerse himself or herself under the water for baptism?

Regarding whether a “virtual” baptismal service may be conducted during the current lockdown, depends on what is meant by “virtual.” The question needs to be clarified as to who has to be physically present because the New Testament does not define fellowship as virtual. Even if the baptismal candidate should stay at home the pastor (or the elder in some cases)¹ who officiates in the baptism has to be present physically and the church members should be able to witness the baptism as well. It may, for example, be appropriate to livestream a baptismal ceremony via the internet, or on a more restricted online platform, for a larger segment of the church. However, the suggestion that the candidate could immerse himself or herself under the water to prevent physical contact with the pastor who baptizes them raises serious theological issues. Nowhere does the New Testament prescribe self-immersion as a form of baptism. Jesus was baptized by John (Matt 3:13–17;

Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–23), the eunuch was baptized by Philip (Acts 8:38–40), and Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19).

Baptism, as biblically understood, requires another person than the one being baptized to administer the ordinance. There seems to be no scriptural justification for a baptismal rite in which the candidate performs the symbolic act of immersion without the agency of a person duly appointed by the church to administer it. Baptism is carried out by the church and received by the candidate. It is not something self-administered. That baptism is something a person receives is indicated among other things by the passive voice of the verbs in Romans 6:3 where the apostle Paul states that we “have been baptized” into Christ Jesus and “were baptized” into his death. This passive formulation requires an external agency to effect the action.

We acknowledge that difficult times may occasionally require making certain adjustments so that we can perform the ministry God has entrusted to us for the benefit of the church. However, as we do so, two important aspects must be considered: First, any adjustment of the baptismal rite must not violate biblical teachings. Second, in cases such as the current pandemic, we should take into account the protocols recommended by the proper authorities to protect the health of baptismal candidates and pastors.

Thus, we suggest that pastors explore some of the following options, which are by no means exhaustive: In areas still subject to restrictions related to the pandemic, the pastor and all baptismal candidates should keep appropriate physical distancing and should wear masks when they are in close physical contact. Physical

attendance at these services should take into account the protocols of the proper authorities and church officials should strive to abide by these protocols. Lives-streaming the baptismal service and/or utilizing an online platform may be a way of enabling the entire congregation and many others to participate in this beautiful ceremony. Since baptism also signals one's entrance into the body of Christ, the church, it is important also to secure the vote of the church for accepting the person being baptized into its fellowship. But in circumstances where the health or safety of any participant is likely to be endangered, it may not be advisable or even necessary to hold gatherings that require personal contact. In such cases, it may be more prudent to delay or reschedule baptismal services until it is safe to conduct them.

Nevertheless, we must also recognize that, even in extenuating circumstances, a situation may arise in which a baptismal candidate is under the conviction of the Holy Spirit to be baptized immediately when he or she has been duly prepared for baptism. In such cases, pastors should evaluate the situation prayerfully. Like medical missionaries on the front lines fighting COVID-19, pastors are fighting the powers of darkness. In the case of a baptismal candidate, for example, who has a very short time to live, it is important for the pastor to decide how to move forward conscientiously with baptism in such a case.

Can communion services be held online?

In order to answer this question, we need to consider the following points:

1. Communion is not a sacrament² as in some Christian denominations. From the biblical standpoint, the communion service was established by Christ as a holy memorial of His sacrifice and a witness to the hope of His second coming. Although extremely significant, the Lord's Supper is not a means of grace, as it is for Christians who view it as a sacrament. It serves as an affirmation of our salvation but is not itself a means of salvation.
2. Although not a sacrament on which we depend for grace, the communion service is a sacred biblical ordinance that, together with baptism, the church is commanded to observe. Regarding its sanctity, the *Church Manual* states, "The service of the Lord's Supper is just as holy today as it was when instituted by Jesus Christ. Jesus is still present when this sacred ordinance is celebrated. 'It is at these, His own appointments, that Christ meets His people, and energizes them by His presence.'—DA 656."³
3. Fellowship as the body of Christ in communion with our Lord is an essential aspect of the communion service. This is best achieved through "the assembling of ourselves together" (Heb 10:25) as believers, washing each other's feet (John 13:1–17), and partaking together of the emblems of His body and blood as a symbol of our unity. As Scripture

indicates, we do not eat and drink of these emblems in isolation.⁴ The ordinance of foot washing and the Lord's Supper belong together and, by definition, foot washing is a congregational activity. As an expression of humility, repentance and love among fellow believers, this ordinance has always served as a testimony of willing service to one another and is one of the strongest signs of Christian discipleship.

4. Neither the Bible nor the writings of Ellen G. White prescribe the frequency for the communion service. In the early days of the Adventist Church, it was held when an ordained minister was present. This could take months and sometimes years. While the communion service should be conducted by an ordained pastor or local elder,⁵ the frequency of this ceremony is not stipulated in Scripture. Therefore, there has never been an official position taken by the Seventh-day Adventist Church on this point, although our congregations generally celebrate communion once a quarter. The sixteenth Fundamental Belief does not prescribe a frequency, and the *Church Manual* only mentions that "usually it is part of the worship service on the next to the last Sabbath of each quarter,"⁶ without setting an absolute standard.
5. In a virtual celebration, it would be much more difficult to follow the stipulation that an ordained pastor or local elder administer the emblems in the proper way.

Thus, virtual communion (through Zoom or any other platform) is a contradiction in terms. The fact that the communion service is sometimes given to individual believers who are sick constitutes an exception that does not break the rule of the communion being a corporate experience and an expression of the unity of the church with their Lord.

In view of the above considerations, a virtual celebration of the Lord's Supper does not seem possible, because it would not adequately reflect the sanctity and communal character of this sacred biblical ordinance, nor would it be in harmony with the *Church Manual*. The best approach, then, would be to wait until the church as a congregation can resume worshipping together in person. Otherwise, we risk trivializing the ordinance of communion by celebrating it in an inappropriate manner that is incompatible with biblical principles. Under the present extenuating circumstances or similar circumstances that may arise in the future, we deem it prudent to patiently wait until the crisis passes so that we can celebrate the Lord's Supper in harmony with the Scriptures and the guidelines given in the *Church Manual*.

Can a "virtual" wedding be conducted because the pastor cannot come to the church (or location) where the couple are to be married?

When God created Adam and Eve, He joined them together in a wonderful lifelong union, called marriage

(Genesis 2). In a Biblical marriage a man and a woman covenant before witnesses to have an exclusive, caring, and loving relationship with each other.⁷ In the Old Testament, elders of a village were involved in wedding and marriage arrangements (Ruth 4). Later, in Christianity, the leaders of a church were and still are involved. Thus a Christian wedding is a ceremony in which the church seeks God's blessing on behalf of a man and woman who want to be joined together as husband and wife. However, it should be recognized that, biblically, marriage is not a sacrament, as some Christians hold, nor an ordinance. While always bearing in mind the biblical guidelines as they are applied in the *Church Manual*, we should be aware that wedding stipulations vary from country to country, making it difficult to establish guidelines that would be applicable everywhere. In some countries, the civil and religious wedding ceremony are one and the same, performed by a minister duly authorized by the church who is also invested with civil authority to issue the marriage certificate. In other places, separate civil and religious wedding ceremonies must be carried out. In such situations, the couple receives the marriage certificate from the proper civil authority and the religious ceremony is conducted by the minister soon afterwards.

Whatever the legal requirements may be, a "virtual" church wedding, in which the officiating pastor joins the couple in holy matrimony from a distance, should only be conducted in extenuating circumstances and when witnesses are present who can legally testify to the marriage ceremony. But every situation should be carefully weighed by the pastor in dialogue with the bride and groom. For example, are the extenuating circumstances such that the pastor would be unable to perform the wedding in person? In the case of a pandemic in which larger gatherings are not allowed by the civil authorities, various measures could be taken to reduce the risk of infection—for example, requiring masks to be worn or reducing the number of attendees. In such cases, the ceremony could be livestreamed to allow for additional invited guests.

For a virtual wedding conducted by a Seventh-day Adventist minister, two considerations apply:

1. If the minister is invested with civil authority to perform the wedding, it must be ascertained whether a virtual wedding ceremony would be legally recognized, given the potential absence of other legal procedures that may be required. If a virtual wedding ceremony can be validated by the appropriate civil authorities, there may be reason to move forward.
2. In countries where civil and religious ceremonies are separate, one should ask the question whether it is also possible for the civil wedding to be done virtually. If so, there may be a case for a virtual religious wedding. But, on the other hand, if the civil wedding requires the personal presence of the couple before the proper authorities, there may not

be plausible justification for a virtual religious ceremony; otherwise, the message may be conveyed that the church wedding is on a lower level or somewhat less important, when in heaven's view it is just as important as the civil ceremony, and perhaps more so.

Therefore, in view of the above considerations, it seems clear that we cannot be dogmatic as to the appropriateness of virtual weddings. Each case must be assessed individually, paying close attention to biblical principles, the *Church Manual*, pertinent legal requirements, and common sense. If, in some very exceptional circumstance, a pastor is not legally allowed to be present, then there may be justification even for a virtual wedding ceremony to be remotely conducted by the minister in the presence of witnesses. However, it should be noted that a virtual ceremony can never fully substitute for the physical presence of a minister who administers the charge, the vows, and makes the declaration of marriage.

In any case, we should welcome those who have made the commitment to be united together as husband and wife in holy matrimony in accordance with biblical principles. Thus, we should do everything possible to help such couples faced with exceptional circumstances, such as the current global crisis of COVID-19, to realize their dreams even if some adjustments need to be made.

Conclusion

Experience from the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that technology can provide resources to help us cope as families and as a church, as well as offer some solutions in certain circumstances that involve our relationship with God. However, we should be aware that virtual technology can never replace the physical presence of believers gathering together to worship the Lord. Virtual technology may bring the voices and images of preachers and sacred music into our homes, but cannot, by itself, generate real Christian fellowship, commitment, and love. We should keep in mind that worship via Zoom and other virtual platforms are a welcome, temporary contingency during these times of social isolation. It is our hope and prayer that the effects of COVID-19 can be mitigated so that we can return to a real communion of God's people. Despite some necessary innovations during these trying times, let us not think or act as if the fellowship of believers were a thing of the past. After all, heaven is a real place where real people will be gathered around a real Person—Jesus Christ Himself.

¹ The *Church Manual* permits an elder to baptize in the absence of an ordained pastor as long as permission to do so is granted by the local Conference (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2016], 75).

² A sacrament is a Christian rite that is held to be an automatic means of divine grace, typically working independently of the attitude of the one who receives it and the one who administers it.

³ *Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual*, 124.

⁴ In all the passages dealing with the communion service, the commands and references to “you” are plural (Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:15–20; John 13:12–17; 1 Cor 11:20–26).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁷ On the biblical concept of marriage see Frank M. Hasel, “The Biblical Concept of Marriage in the Bible” in Ekkehardt Mueller and Elias Brasil de Souza, eds., *Marriage: Biblical and Theological Aspects*. Biblical Research Institute Studies in Biblical Ethics, vol. 1 (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2015), 25–48.

God’s handiwork in nature is not God Himself in nature. . . . While nature is an expression of God’s thought, it is not nature but the God of nature that is to be exalted.

~Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 8:263