



WHY VIRTUAL COMMUNION IS NOT NEARLY RADICAL ENOUGH

Paul R. Hinlicky

As the implications of COVID-19 finally dawned in the consciousness of America last spring, a pastor asked me about virtual communion; i.e., a service in which the pastor live-streams the words of institution while the folks at home set up bread and wine in front of their computer screens. In reply, I expressed my theological opinion that the Lord's Supper is intended for the times and places where and when the church dispersed in vocation and mission gathers as the church (1 Corinthians 11:18) for rest and nourishment. This is because the *koinonia* (the Greek of 1 Corinthians 10:16) of the assembly in the sharing of the one cup and one loaf is an essential aspect of its being the Lord's Supper—not my supper or your supper (the very thing against which the apostle contends in 1 Corinthians 10:17). I should concede that my opinion here betrays a certain criticism of Western, including Lutheran, overemphasis on what makes the sacrament *valid* at the expense of its *meaning* as the body of Christ, and a corresponding reduction of its meaning to the privative forgiveness of sin at the expense of its positive blessings of union with Christ in the *koinonia* of His body. We should know better, as Luther said: "Where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation."

I told the pastor that in place of offering such a truncated Eucharist, I would take the deprivation imposed by the virus on our *koinonia* in the Lord as an opportunity to teach my people how this pandemic is to be interpreted in faith as a judgment on our collective greedy individualism. By this phrase, I mean our culturally dominant consumerist mental-

ity extending even to matters of faith, such that my private dose of inspiration or consolation trumps all other considerations. But I would also teach that Eucharistic deprivation during this sad and troubling time can also be made to serve the ultimate renewal of Holy Communion: Communion is to be understood not only as every person's communion with the Lord but also simultaneously and inseparably *koinonia* with one another gathered in the Lord by common sacramental eating and drinking.

As Jesus unites us with Himself by imparting His body and blood for forgiveness, life and salvation to each who receives the elements in repentance and

faith, so also He unites each with all the others to whom He so imparts Himself. Hence the Eucharistic "fast" (as ELCA leaders have named it) during this time is nothing I would otherwise recommend, but the reality of deprivation imposed by the dangerous and highly contagious virus and the govern-

ment's public safety response to that threat. The fast thus provides a time for radical reflection on what makes the church the church, precisely because we cannot gather as the church.

When I posted these reflections I had given to the pastor on Facebook, they generated a good deal of approbation from theological friends and followers, but also quite a storm of *ad hominem* attacks from a circle of pastors who regard themselves as quite radical and who tried to pigeonhole me as a cranky control freak wanting ecclesiastical power. I've been marginalized for so long in the ELCA for criticizing its bullying ways that I personally found this critique

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laughable! Not that I'm complaining. As a happy warrior, I had hoped for a more serious theological reflection on the meaning of Holy Communion, but the over-the-top polemics of the self-proclaimed "rad" pastors, blithely unaware of their Zwinglian separation of the true body and the symbolic bread, torpedoed that hope—at least within the limited format provided by social media where folks shoot first and aim later.

As a result of these slings and arrows, I have developed further thoughts on why virtual commu-

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nion is such a bad idea, which I will now formulate here.¹ I explained in these pages some years back that 1 Corinthians and the Lutheran Confessions make it abundantly clear that the Lord's Supper is a communal meal for the faithful gathered in *koinonia* of the body and blood of Christ to eat and drink together from the one loaf and the one cup,² so I won't repeat that argument here. Rather I want to hoist the self-proclaimed rad pastors on their own petards, explaining why so-called virtual communion is not nearly *radical enough*. I charge that the proposal for virtual communion amounts to so much ambulance chasing and/or desperate marketing in which the consumerist tail wags the dog of the ministry of

Word and sacrament. The fast imposed upon us by the virus summons us instead to sober *social* self-examination. A corresponding theological concern is that the genuinely radical potential of the Lutheran doctrine of original sin is squandered in an unreflective rush to digitalize the sacraments. But true knowledge of sinfulness teaches how envy, greed, or covetousness fill the vacuum in the human soul emptied of true fear, love and trust in God our Creator. The house of cards built upon Gordon Gecko's "greed is good" mantra is tumbling, undermined by the pandemic – but do we recognize it as the judgment of God upon us?

Our Greedy Consumerism

While the bogeyman term that arose in the 1980s was so-called neoconservatism, the far more accurate descriptor, neoliberalism, has since emerged to designate contemporary culture, in which the market extends beyond the marketplace, and comes to dominate all aspects of human life so that nothing is sacred and everything has a price. The old liberalism represented by figures like John Locke and Adam Smith sought the freedom of entrepreneurship in open markets no longer under the thumbs of royal prerogative, excessive taxation, and ecclesiastical law. A potent critique of serfdom and slavery was part and parcel of this old liberalism, which fostered political democracy and a general rise in the wealth of nations through the epoch of industrialization—though not without painful costs of massive social dislocation and suffering in tandem with new forms of domination through foreign colonial exploitation and domestic wage slavery. Over against the reformist response of democratic regimes to

the crises of capitalism in World War I and the Great Depression an intellectual movement pioneered by the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek arose among mid-twentieth-century intellectuals. This movement maintained that unlimited market exchange is the most efficient processor of information and thus should be allowed to displace the political role of democratically elected regimes in regulating markets for social purposes. This latter position is what is meant by neoliberalism.³ Neoliberalism is in the very air we breathe today, so it has also penetrated the churches. This more

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recent development, however, has deep roots in the Enlightenment project of Euro-American modernity.

The late Jean Bethke Elshtain's final book, *Sovereignty: God, State and Self*,⁴ develops an innovative and penetrating critique of our culture of "excarnation," the opposite trajectory of Christian belief in divine incarnation promising the ultimate redemption of the body (cf. Romans 8:23). Her point is that the modern dream of the domination of "extended things" by "thinking things" initiated in

Descartes' pioneering modern philosophy has brought us to a point where our greedy *libido dominandi* or lust for domination (Augustine) has turned against the stubborn recalcitrance of the human body itself. We increasingly regard the body as nothing but a burdensome vehicle of the true self, yet infinitely malleable, putty to be manipulated by never-satisfied egoism.

Of course, the body, which we are, is fragile and vulnerable: from dust we were taken, and to dust we return. And the truth is that the thinking organs which are our brains are also embedded in the ecology of physical and living things and not some transcendent exception to this physical ecology. Against the anthropological dualism of the modern culture of excarnation, Christian faith affirms our bodily state of creatureliness in all its vulnerability as something precious—not a liability to be overcome or even left behind by technology but a priceless gift to be stewarded in hope of redemption.

Against this culture of excarnation, the church that remembers its own confession must as a public witness uphold the integrity of the Lord's Supper as a *koinonia* in the body and blood of Christ: so, Paul says, not with words alone but with our obedience of faith in gathering under the mandate "to do this in remembrance," we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes again. Sustaining this Christian witness is a particular obligation of our Lutheran confession, which has held to the bodily presence of Christ in the supper. You cannot transmit the body of Christ, which *is* (*est*, not *significat*) the loaf designated by Christ's word of promise, "This is My body," through fiberoptic cable or wi-fi. The thought of transmitting the words of institution to multiple

parties separated into households *de facto* spiritualizes, privatizes and probably also factionalizes the Lord's Supper along class lines—as if all members of the congregation have equal access to Internet technology in their homes. The Pauline rebuke in 1 Corinthians 11:23 applies directly: "What? Do

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you not have homes in which to eat and drink?" What can be done privately at home is *not* the public gathering of the *ecclesia*. Hearth and home are for ordinary meals, but the Lord's Supper is for the time we come together out of our private lives as the church (1 Corinthians 11:18), which is the body of Christ feeding on the body of Christ.

To be sure, it is somewhat different with the ministry of the word, the public proclamation of the gospel, which can be communicated publicly through the new media (though not in the personal and sacramental form of the confessor's *Ego te absolvo*). If we notice, however, that the public proclamation of the word is always aimed at the community and the sacraments of initiation and sustenance there, I don't see that this practice is controversial at all, as my own efforts to theologize via social media implicitly acknowledges. The origin of this essay on Facebook and the theological discussion it inspired there is evidence enough of the utility of that medium. I emphatically affirm all the pastoral strategies to get the word out during this time through social media, as I participate in them myself, provided only that pastors remain responsible to confessional norms and accountable to the wider church. But that accountability entails the normative conviction that the sacramental sign of the one loaf and the one cup is not some accidental or arbitrary husk that can be shucked off to deliver some kernel of the word alone hidden within it. As the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth is essential to the incarnation of the Son of God, so the blessed bread and wine of the gathered assembly are essential to the promise, "This is My body given for you." Sacramental renewal in our lifetime, provided it remains the living expression of this Reformation theology of the incarnation, is the significant—and, I would underline, *urgent* witness against our present culture of excarnation, which is a culture of death.

Another testimony I would add to the truly radical problem of our lethal culture of excarnation is Johann Hari, *Lost Connec-*

tions: *Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression—And the Unexpected Solutions*.⁵ This is a book I would urge every pastor to read because, like Elshtain, Hari argues against the contemporary pharmacological tendency to separate the depressed condition of the thinking organ, the brain, from extended things, the predatory social and polluted physical environment of the “greed is good” culture. As a college professor, I have watched in amazement in the last twenty years as a generation of young people has descended into a fog of anxiety and depression, all the while striving to maintain the real utopianism of the modern self with its inflated ambitions, utterly disregarding all the negative signals they receive from their own bodies. Hari’s psychological account of excarnation is a clue to what I will be saying as I argue that the proposal for virtual communion is not nearly radical enough.

Eucharistic Fast

What has this recommended reading to do with Eucharistic fasting during this time of the pandemic? As in divine love it is the glory of Christ to descend into our hands, into our mouths, into us who are bodies, that He may bind us together with all the other bodies to whom He communicates Himself, so it is Christian love, recognizing the abiding organic solidarity of the common body of humanity (Romans 8), temporarily to refrain from the real Lord’s Supper (and not to hawk the cheap comfort of an ersatz Internet Lord’s Supper), can be and should be interpreted theologically as a sacrificial act of love for the sake of those most vulnerable to the contagion.

If we balk at this recommendation of fasting, let me note again that fasting from the Lord’s Sup-

per is not anything I would otherwise commend, but rather something that has been imposed upon us by the pandemic. And this imposition is in urgent need of pastoral and theological interpretation that goes to the root of the matter. What is God doing to us to allow this evil virus to undermine our way of life? I can imagine, however, two different sources of resistance to Eucharistic fasting, one better than the other. First, let’s discuss the aforementioned greedy individualism which permeates contemporary consciousness in neoliberal society. This

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greedy individualism is the chief reason why we have become so allergic to the utterly biblical motif of the wrath of God manifesting in catastrophic events like famine and pestilence, when our ecological sins are revisited upon us as God hands us over to the consequences of our own sinful desires. Indiscriminate rhetoric against “blaming the victim”—even when the inevitable consequences of *our own* socially irresponsible behavior befall us—keeps us pastorally tongue-tied when in fact a theological interpretation of disasters like the current one matters im-

mensely—and not for the cheesy purpose of defending God or the vicious purpose of scapegoating. When it is clear on the level of individual lives that there are perpetrators and victims, it is *of course* morally obtuse to blame the victim for victimization. But an epidemic strikes on the level of individual lives only because it operates first of all through social life subject to trans-individual forces. And this is the level on which the doctrine of original sin enters and enables prophetic discernment.

So it is true that as an individual I do not contract the coronavirus because God is picking me out for special punishment; God is not Zeus casting thunderbolts upon the individuals who offend his ego or otherwise displease him. We have it on no less authority than Jesus according to whom the heavenly Father causes His rain to fall upon the just and the unjust alike; Who rebuked those who asked who sinned that the tower of Siloam should have collapsed and killed them (Luke 13). Yet the Lord added to this rebuke the admonition, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish!” The deeper truth that we learn from Old Testament Scripture especially is that precisely as individuals, we do not exist solely or simply as individuals, but we flourish or decline individually as members bound organically to one another in the common body of creatures of the earth made for community, not isolation. The coronavirus contagion is a negative witness to the ineradicable social-organic bond of us earthlings; it speaks painfully against the widespread American delusion that I am an island, a sovereign self who makes his own destiny; who can and must live alone for “me, myself, and I.” With the prophets of Israel, to promote such a serious social self-examination along these

lines is the precious opportunity given to us by the Eucharistic fast that has been imposed upon us. To evade such sober self-examination, however, by the quick fix of virtual communion falsely assuring us of “peace, when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 6:14) is to miss the pastoral mark by a long shot.

A second source of resistance to the recommendation of Eucharistic fasting for this time is one with

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better roots in Lutheran tradition, namely, the deep commitment to pastoral care and the existential concern to comfort and console—in this case especially those isolated by the contagion. I want to acknowledge this motive and underscore the freedom and responsibility of pastors to reach out to those excluded by the pandemic from the means of grace and find ways of delivering comfort and consolation. In an emergency, departures from normal practice may be justified in so far as they are not a pretext for undermining what is normative and to set precedents for the future—which some of the rad pastor advocates of virtual communion openly profess, seeking what they call

a decentralization of the sacrament and a declericalization of its service—that is to say, a virtually Anabaptist ecclesiology and sacramental theology (not that I would sully the Anabaptists with this frivolous theology). I shall have more to say on this matter shortly.

Excursus on the Wrath of God

But for the moment allow me a few further thoughts on the wrath of God. The theological correlate of the wrath of God is the doctrine of original sin, which articulates a social or corporate understanding of sinfulness;⁶ that is, one that does not focus exclusively or disproportionately on individual culpability but on sin as a power that has universally overtaken humanity such that our best civil or legal righteousness falls short of the glory of God. This corporate focus on sinfulness as a state of captivated being likewise recalibrates liberated personal virtue (the “new obedience” of the Augsburg Confession VI) as *social* responsibility, i.e., not oriented exclusively or disproportionately toward individual moral excellence but rather to humble and loving service even of those undeserving of it. Paul thus makes the point that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against *all* ungodliness and wickedness of humanity and that it consists in God handing over humans to the consequences of their own sin. If we give up this genuinely radical diagnosis of the human predicament, we give up the prophetic indictment of humanity, the controversy of the Lord with His creation gone astray. And then the actual need for reconciliation in Christ is likewise undermined, as Luther argued against the antinomians. It is Theology 101 to point out that you cannot have a resurrection without first a death; nor justifica-

tion without preceding judgment; nor merciful grace without first divine wrath.

Why then are contemporary religionists so allergic to the notion? Is it not precisely the individualistic and consumerist mentality which misunderstands the social nature of sinfulness and consequently of divine wrath? This individualistic misunderstanding surely has aided and abetted those fire-and-brimstone preachers who think they need to terrorize people into the kingdom of God, even certain Lutherans who think that the law must be preached ruthlessly until people are in a state of panic before the sweet gospel can ever be appreciated. I've certainly spent enough time in the pastoral ministry picking up the piec-

This act of identification is precisely what the liturgy of the Lord's Supper depends on, the specific act in gathering as the church when a specific loaf is set apart with the words, “This is My body given for you.”

es of shattered souls recovering from such terroristic preaching. The deeper truth is that no one understands sinfulness or is concerned about divine wrath except those brought into the reconciliation of peace with God through the victory of the crucified and risen Christ; for whom the favor of God becomes the sure founda-

tion and not the uncertain goal of the Christian life. But the solution to terrorist preachers is not to jet-tison prophetic proclamation of the wrath of God against social injustice, but to do it well. I fear, however, that there is a deeper source among theological liberals for their allergy to the eminently biblical and prophetic proclamation of the wrath of God against social injustice than repugnance at terrorist preachers.

On this side contemporary resistance to the canonical teaching the wrath of God on human sinfulness arises from those who insist that the Bible be filtered by the philosophical tradition of the apathy⁷ of God. But Lutherans who remember their own theology belong to the camp that thinks to the contrary that it is the philosophical tradition of the apathy of God that must be critiqued and reformed by the Bible, which gives us the God of love whose love opposes what is against love. That's what divine wrath is, not an offended, egotistical fit of hate as folks imagine both on the left and on the right, but divine creative love negating our lovelessness, indifference, even the apathy that we idolize. Of course this event of God's being against us should make us nervous! But it serves to drive us to Christ—that is, if we have a Christ big enough (in the way of Isaiah 53) to conquer for us even the wrath of God—which is exactly what Paul's gospel teaches from its earliest iteration, as in 1 Thessalonians 1:9–10. The “dramatic coherence,” as the late Robert Jenson would have put it, of biblical narrative tells of how God in Christ surpasses the wrath of His love to triumph for the mercy of it for us and for all. And this provides Jesus Christ and Him crucified the real and radical pastoral comfort and consolation which meets people in the actual

terror of isolation and abandonment under the powers of sin and death.

How little, I fear, this gospel drama is proclaimed in its truth and purity in today's churches! We get instead pious protestations of the hiddenness of God mysteriously distant from real life while we experience every day the powers of sin and death overwhelming

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us. We get vague and sentimental affirmations of a nice and loving divine parent disconnected from our on-the-earth reality. Some day this pandemic will fade away. Maybe people will even return to church to hear a word from God about this catastrophe. But if they hear nothing that they cannot already tell themselves, they will have no good reason ever to return.

*“Real” Presence
Is Not Radical Enough*

It should be easy to affirm that Christ as the risen One is “really” in the preached word that can be conveyed through social media. He is really present to promise Himself in His righteousness, life, and peace in joyful exchange

for the auditor's sin, death, and disease. But as previously mentioned, I discovered long ago that in the Lutheran confessional writings concerning the Lord's Supper, what was at stake was never this so-called “real” presence but rather the bodily presence of Jesus Christ according to His word and promise. What difference does this apparently subtle distinction make? Answer: historically it excluded the so-called “spiritual” (or “real”) presence as the specific blessing or benefit of the Lord's Supper, just as it excludes notions of the “invisible” church as the “real” church, as opposed to the visible assembly gathered around word and sacrament. By the Holy Spirit, the word of the gospel awakens faith; and if we want to speak of spiritual presence, we are not talking vaguely about something we know not what, but about this ministry of the Holy Spirit who makes Jesus Christ real to us. But what differentiates the Lord's Supper is the promised presence of Jesus Christ personally in His own body-and-blood for us to eat and drink together, thus remaking us again and again to be the body of the risen Christ on this earth.

Why does this specificity of Jesus' bodily presence matter? For one thing, it concerns the identity of Jesus Christ as the very body born of Mary and crucified under Pontius Pilate but vindicated and exalted to be present in His glorified body for the gathering of His faithful. This act of identification is precisely what the liturgy of the Lord's Supper depends on, the specific act in gathering as the church when a specific loaf is set apart with the words, “This is My body given for you.”

As already the early church father Ignatius of Antioch discerned, Christological docetism and dualistic Gnostic spirituali-

ty are sneaking in whenever this specific act of identification of Jesus Christ in the flesh to give His flesh for us is compromised.

Mark those who hold strange doctrines concerning the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us, how that they are contrary to the mind of God. They have no care for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the afflicted, none for the prisoner, nor the hungry or thirsty. They abstain from the Eucharist and prayer, because they do not allow that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which flesh suffered for our sins, and which the Father in his goodness raised up.⁸

A vague notion of “real” presence evaporates the concrete promise and its intended audience; it is a *de facto* spiritualizing of the Lord’s Supper to accommo-

date an individualistic and consumerist need for private assurance—a capitalist version of the private mass which the Augsburg Confession vigorously repudiates. Of course, Christ can be present anywhere and everywhere; that is, without the Lord’s Supper, but as Luther explained, “It is one thing for God to be present and another thing for God to be present for you.” God is present “for us” as the body of Christ given for us specifically and concretely according to Christ’s last will and testament. In obedience to the mandate that we do this in remembrance of Him, we remember Him precisely in this way as the One crucified and risen for us in His own body when we gather, many bodies as the one body.

What Is Radical Enough?

As I write these words for LUTHERAN FORUM at the end of May 2020, churches are on the

culsp of reopening, even though it is uncertain whether the pandemic is under control. I may be wrong, but my opinion is that we will be dealing with the pandemic for some time to come and that in any case the economic damage stemming from it is deep and structural. I am thus doubtful that we can return to the *status quo ante*. An implication of the foregoing is that we should not rush back to weekly communion – at least not without considerable catechesis along the lines suggested in this essay and new safeguards against infection. Even as the pandemic is mitigated, I fear above all that we as a culture will draw all the wrong conclusions about the sustainability of neoliberalism and the availability of technological quick fixes to whatever disasters of our own making occur in the future. If I’ve made it clear that jerry-rigged communion through the Internet is false comfort, I don’t know that I have succeeded in summoning

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sober self-examination for all the ways in which we have accommodated the Christian faith to the greedy modern culture of the sovereign self. For the foreseeable future, this should be a time of prayer, fasting, and repentance which reminds us that there is no risen Christ Who does not remain forever the crucified One.

What should deeply disturb us in our poisonous culture of politics by denunciation, in which I decline to participate, is the baseline appeal of “return to normalcy,” whether the normalcy preferred is that of the pre-Trump Obama era or the pre-pandemic Trump economy. Our superficial politics seems incapable of grasping the profoundly disruptive implications of the pandemic. The entire modern epoch and the global civilization we have built upon it are based on the post-Christian doctrine of the sovereign human self, according to which thinking things achieve mastery over extended, i.e., physical things. Spectacular successes of this project in science and technology have helped us build a complex and multilayered global civilization based upon energy networks, transportation networks, communication networks, food networks, military-security alliances, and so on. What the pandemic exposes is the terrible fragility of this house of cards, where the collapse of any one of these networks threatens to rebound catastrophically on all the others. This catastrophe portends the urban apocalypse that occupies the dark fantasies of video games.

Our cultural accommodation to this modern civilization has been to accept the dualism between thinking things and physical things to such an extent that we commoditize our own bodies as interchangeable cogs in a vast economic machine, fetching what-

ever price the market can bear for their service. We have been willing to make this bargain with the devil, drudgery in exchange for goodies (again, see the book by Johann Hari!), because it promised us sufficient wealth and personal security to make the best of our own physical beings. Now the pandemic threatens to break the deal. This is the real anxiety running through our civilization. Radical pastoral care will expose this anxiety of a faithless generation in the light of the Lord’s prophetic controversy with His creation gone astray and so deeply in need of reconciliation. Whether this pandemic produces an urban apocalypse, no one can say. I certainly hope not and pray not. But however it turns out, it should be interpreted theologically as a dire warning. That is why I say more of the same dualistic game—virtual communion—is no solution but rather an evasion, hence not nearly radical enough. What is radical is repentance (Luke 3:9). *LF*

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Endnotes

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Let’s Talk*, the online forum of the Metro Chicago Synod, at the request of its editor, Frank Senn.

2. Paul R. Hinlicky, “Christ’s Bodily Presence in the Holy Supper: Real or Symbolic?” *Lutheran Forum* 33/3 (Fall 1999): 24–28.

3. Philip Mirowski and Edward Nik-Khah, *The Knowledge We Have Lost in Information: The History of Information in Modern Economics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

4. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State and Self: The Gifford Lectures* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

5. Johann Hari, *Lost Connections: Uncovering the Real Causes of Depression—And the Unexpected Solutions* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

6. I have argued this thesis extensively in my systematic theology, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 206–221.

7. In the sense of the Greek word *apatheia*, regarded as a divine attribute in the sense of freedom from unruly appetites or emotional disturbances. It is better translated as “equanimity,” as the English word *apathy* has acquired negative connotations of indifference or lack of interest.

8. Ignatius, *To the Smyrneans*, 6.