

THE INDIVIDUAL COMMUNION CUP 633 W. WARTBURG CIRCLE  
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The use of individual communion cups in the administration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a comparatively recent innovation in some Protestant churches, notably in the Reformed churches, where it has gained a considerable foothold. From here it slowly began to be imitated by Lutheran churches here and there, and is from year to year being introduced in more of our own congregations. A study of the reasons advanced for its introduction will, I believe, enable us to evaluate the merits and demerits of the practice, and help us to crystallize an opinion of it.

There is nothing in Holy Writ which would warrant, or even suggest the use of individual communion cups in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In plain words we read there, "And He took the cup ( τὸ ποτήριον ), and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it." It is clear from the wording of all the Biblical accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper that a single cup was passed from disciple to disciple. After that, when the sacrament was observed in the first Christian church at Jerusalem, the apostles following the divine example of their Lord gave "the cup" to those early Christians. From house to house, from church to church, from generation to generation, "the cup" has been the symbol of the union and communion of the Christian and his Lord, and of the Christians with each other. We are all familiar with the solemnity that exists in churches where the nineteenth century old form is preserved, when the sacred cup is given from person to person kneeling in communion, a solemnity which no modern innovation in the form of the sacrament can either create or preserve.

Nevertheless, modern times have brought about a change. Here and there, the common cup has been replaced by "noiseless" trays with rows of diminutive "sanitary" receptacles. In such cases "the cup of the Lord" which symbolizes communion not only with the Master, but also with believers to your right and to your left without end in space or time, is ruled out. Under this new form at times a sight presents itself to the sensitive observer accustomed to conservative ways, which, by slightly stretching the imagination comes close to the fringes of sacrilege and robs the ancient form of worship of a fundamental element. One person is quoted on this point, "If you ask me, I don't like those dishes carried around. I never did, and I never will. For me it spoils everything. At communion time I would much rather be back in my former church where communion is still communion to me and not a cluttering up of the altar and chancel with trays of glasses and the scurrying feet and ending up with the sight of used dishes."

What has brought about this situation? What are the reasons advanced for the use of individual cups in Holy Communion? Several causes may be cited. Perhaps the most prevailing is a false pride and a hankering for nicety. Another is the over-worked demand for the application of hygiene in public, for a more sanitary sacrament than the Lord ordained. At the bottom of either of these "reasons" you may find nothing but unbelief exploited by commercialism and the hysteria of pathetically nervous people who have less faith in the promises of the Almighty than they manifest in the glib advertisement of some clever business concern. Therefore they say, away with the common cup. The pastor yields and bows to scrupulosity and the skill of clever salesmanship, in some cases with sorrow in his heart.

One of the reasons advanced for the introduction of individual communion cups is pride and nicety. People who favor them for this reason will ask, "Who of you would invite guests to his house and then demand of them to drink from the same vessel. Does not courtesy and common decency call for separate utensils in our home life? How then can we permit in church what we consider contrary to good practice elsewhere? Therefore, away with the common cup.

From an old congregation in the East a pastor reported a number of years ago how among the families who had come under his spiritual care there was one which especially had suffered the hardships of poverty. The perfection and sale of a patent, however, brought these people into sufficient property for comfortable living. Until that time they had always communed with other less fortunate church members, drinking with them from "the cup". But then things had to change. To drink with the same old neighbors and friends became to them offensive, and finally they stayed away altogether until the pastor yielded to their demand and abolished the ancient chalice. When the use of individual cups in Holy Communion leads to such divisions and class distinctions, its purpose is clearly defeated. What a contradiction of faith and practice! Did not Christ die for all of us? How can a believer reject another in the sacrament? Jesus dined with sinners, and doubtless used a common cup according to the custom of the day. Are we better than He? How can we go to the table of the Lord if we have something against our brother? We desire to enter into communion with God, but are not willing to share this communion with fellow-Christians at our right and left kneeling before God's altar! cf. 1 John 4, 20. A sorry picture indeed to think of! Pride and nicety are certainly no valid reason for the innovation.

The other objection is that of sanitation. The theory is that here as in the case of the common drinking cup at the well the danger of spreading contagious diseases is so great that it is safer, yes, advisable to use individual cups to eliminate this hazard. This objection sounds more scientific than the other. Because it is based on the science of bacteriology it may be subjected to scientific investigation. Is it actually a fact which can be demonstrated by evidence, that diseases have or can be transmitted by the common cup used in Holy Communion? Let us see.

Every year there are millions who go to communion. For at least four hundred years, as far as modern history is concerned, the consecrated cup has been given to people, and by all means we should know of some cases of infection through the use of the common vessel. Where are they? No instances are on record in medical history, where this has ever been proved to have happened.

The order of service in the Episcopal Church instructs the administering clergyman concerning the remaining wine in the chalice in this manner, "If any remain of that which is consecrated it shall not be carried out of the church, but the priest shall reverently drink the same." He does this as part of the service, customarily rinsing the eucharistic cup with water and drinking that too. Yet, during all the centuries that the thousands of the Episcopal clergy have observed this custom, no case is known that any of them has experienced the fate of Socrates on account of it.

Another case in point is the offer which, according to the "Allgemeine Lutherische Kirchenzeitung," was made by the president of the Prussian Department of Health in 1904, when 100,000 Mark were offered for the discovery in Germany of any case of disease

that could be traced to infection through the common cup, the only kind known to be used in state churches over there in those days. The offer was open for ten years, widely heralded, but no one claimed the reward. J. B. Bernthal, author of "Physiology from a Christian View-Point" in an article in the *Gemeindeblatt*, 1937, p. 200, entitled "Neuerungen in der Kirche" asks, "Wie steht es mit der Ansteckung von Krankheiten mit dem gemeinsamen Kelch? Bis auf den heutigen Tag haben Aerzte noch nicht beweisen koennen, dass je eine Krankheit dadurch verbreitet worden waere. Schreiber dieses Artikels hat sich selbst einmal an die American Medical Association gewandt mit der Bitte, ihm mitteilen zu wollen, ob man beweisen koennte, dass durch den vergoldeten Kelch, der gemeinsam gebraucht wird, Krankheiten verbreitet, oder jemand dadurch angesteckt wuerde. Die Antwort war NEIN.

In March of this year an article appeared in various newspapers and magazines (*Milwaukee Journal*, *Time*, *Pathfinder*) entitled "Sanitary Communion" (quote) "Sacred tradition of the common communion cup which dates back to the 'Upper room' in Jerusalem has been freed of the oft-repeated charge of being a 'germ-carrier'. by the scientific research of two University of Chicago professors. In a report to the *Journal of Infectious Diseases*, Dr. Wm. Burrows, associate professor of bacteriology, and Elizabeth Hemmons, Dr. instructor in the Walter G. Zoller dental clinic, point out that many metals, particularly silver, have long been known to have a bactericidal effect, and are self-sterilizing, so that common cups do not spread disease. Significant differences between the usual restaurant tableware and the silver communion cup, the scientists stated, were the bacteria-killing action of silver and the care with which the sacrament is administered."

A paragraph from an editorial which was printed in the Philadelphia Press, when the modern idea had made some headway among the reformed churches, bears quoting here. It stated, "A good many sensible people have about come to the conclusion that the extreme application of sanitary regulations is in danger of spoiling what might be in moderation a good thing for the public. The very suggestion that devout people be debarred from the use of a chalice which is endeared to them by tradition and religious practice for generations is a case in point. It is a case indeed of theory gone mad. For there is just as much likelihood that any one may be injured physically by the devout use of the communion chalice as there is that one may be drowned in the desert. . . . Good <sup>plain</sup> common sense is useful in dealing with other things."

When the believer approaches the table of the Lord he comes to receive the Real Presence of Christ's body and blood, the effective forgiveness of sins. To him the sacrament is a means of grace by which blessings are imparted to him. Unbelief is of a different mind. The blessing is crowded out of the sacrament by imaginary evils which the cup may convey. The chalice is thought of as the habitat of destructive germs, leading the way of an elastic imagination to sudden death. Individualistic communicants feel called upon to correct the mistakes of the Master just as Robert Ingersoll once ventured upon correcting "The Mistakes of Moses."

Is there nothing which may be said in defense of the individual cup? One might perhaps defend it with the statement that the form of distribution has nothing to do with the nature and potency of the sacrament, and therefore it should be left to anyone to determine the form in which he desires to continue the administration or reception of Christ's precept. One might

insist that the form in which Holy Communion is administered is an adiaphoron, and that we are all entitled to exercise our Christian liberty in this respect. That is true enough. But though the form may not change the nature of the sacrament, yet it may certainly interfere with its benefits.

Whatever arguments have been advanced in favor of the individual communion cups they have been so thin that "fragile" is written over the entire lot. Deep down in our hearts we know that "individual" and "communion" are mutually exclusive terms. "Individual" stands for independence, isolation, separation and solitude, in fact it stands for most anything which "communion", particularly Holy Communion, attempts to overcome. To combine these two terms for designating a single act is a contradiction pure and simple, a literary fallacy which reaches its climax in the application of this term to the "individual communion" of saints.

Well, what is the solution of the problem? Is there an answer to the objections raised against the traditional communion with the common cup? Certainly. Communion for the sick, for those who in a public service might offend the more sensitive of their fellow-believers because of their diseased condition, should, and can, and always has been administered in private. These are emergency cases as a rule, and the objections raised to the individual cup are certainly removed by the circumstances in such cases. Also, one can conceive of providing a few special cups for a public celebration of Holy Communion for serious pathological cases in addition to the common cup used generally.

To return from the use of individual communion cups to the common cup, will in many instances prove difficult. Yet it may interest you to hear how one pastor solved this knotty problem.

When he entered upon his duties in a new charge shortly before Christmas he was met by two to him unpleasant surprises. One was a Santa Claus outfit for traditional use on Christmas Eve, the other an individual communion set. Both were ready for use within a 24-hour period during the festival. Calling up his last ounce of resourcefulness he finally won in eliminating the otherwise used masquerade from the Christmas program. Next day was communion. Pearls of perspiration gathered on his forehead as he thought of the mutilated, disfigured, emaciated service that would not mean communion to him. Cautiously, he talked matters over with his council. Anticipating a long line of further disagreements and foreboding trouble, reluctantly, they finally produced the discarded, but valuable silver and gold chalice and tankard. After using it for the consecration the next morning, lifting it high for all to see, he turned, before the distribution, to his new congregation, explaining the sacrament. He invited them to choose whichever cup they desired to participate in, the common one to be used first. A surprisingly large number came. This he repeated each successive time that the Lord's Supper was celebrated. The individualists became fewer and fewer until none were left, though the total number of communicants had increased. The individual cups stood on the altar unused through many celebrations. Today they are no longer prepared but gather dust with the Santa Claus costume in some corner.

Our divine worship expresses our inner convictions and breathes the spirit of our faith. The common cup is the one visible ritual expression of the "communion of saints" in the Lord. It is a fact and a symbol at the same time. Rob the church of this cup and you take away one of the great gifts of "our Lord Jesus Christ of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named." The same rationalistic spirit which denies the real presence of God in the sacrament insists



now that infectious poisons are present instead.

He who healed the sick, silenced the storm and raised the dead, comes to us in the sacrament. We come to God asking life, will he give us death instead? Only extreme unbelief can entertain such thoughts. Faith, immersed in the reality of the presence of God in the sacrament, knows nothing of physical contagion in the use of this means of grace and peace. All uncertainty and hesitation must disappear if one thinks back to the first communion service when, "in the night in which He was betrayed . . . He took the cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them saying, 'drink ye all of it; this cup is the New Testament in my blood, which is shed for you, and for many, for the remission of sins; this do as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.'" To which we might fittingly add, "Forget the germs."