

A RATIONALE FOR USING THE COMMON CUP FOR HOLY COMMUNION



THE SYMBOLISM OF “THE CUP” IN SCRIPTURE

“The cup” is a picture used throughout the Scriptures to symbolize what we receive from God, as we “drink” from his hand either blessing or wrath.

Psalm 23:5 (NKJV) You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over.

Jeremiah 25:15 (ESV) Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: “Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. “

Psalm 116:12–13 (ESV) What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

Matthew 20:22–23 (ESV) Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my

right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.”

Mark 14:36 (ESV) And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus gave his own cup to his disciples, filled, not with wrath, but with blessing. What could be a more fitting symbol for Holy Communion! The one “cup of blessing” symbolizes the blessing we receive from God through the One Man, Jesus Christ. More than that, the one cup actually distributes to many individuals the real blood of the One Man, Jesus Christ, “shed for many for the remission of sins.” One Sacrifice for many sinners, one cup for many individuals.

Luther says this about the cup:

In reference to this particular cup, then, Matthew and Mark may be understood as saying that each of the apostles had a cup before him on the table, or at least that there were more cups than one. But now, when Christ gives a new, special drink of his blood, he commands them all to drink out of this single cup. Thus, in proffering it and with a special gesture, Christ takes his own cup and lets them all drink of it, in distinction from all the other ordinary cups on the table, in order that they might better observe that it was a special drink in distinction from the other draughts which had been given them during the meal. The bread he could readily—indeed, he must—have so distributed that each received a piece for himself. But the wine he could not have distributed in this manner, but had to serve it in a cup for them all, indicating verbally that it was to be a drink in common for them all, not offered to and drunk by only one or two or three, as the other cups on the table were available to each as he wished. (AE:37:311)

The use of a Common Cup matches exactly the symbolism that Jesus chose to use on the night he was betrayed. With a Common Cup, we all

literally receive from God's hand (through his called servant) a single cup from which to drink, and in that cup is the blood of a single Man, literally distributed to many individuals.

The use of Individual Cups completely removes this symbolism and introduces its own faulty symbolism. Rather than each one receiving the blood of the One Man from the one cup, the wine is pre-separated into many tiny cups so that, by the time the wine is blessed (or "consecrated") and the real presence of Christ's blood comes to the wine, it is already divided into dozens of individual portions. Many cups for many individuals instead of one cup for many individuals; many neatly separated measurements of Christ's blood instead of a single supply that flows to many.

This is not the symbolism Christ intended. He could have easily blessed all the wine that was already poured in the various cups that were already on the table on the night he was betrayed. But he didn't. Instead, he blessed the one cup to be given to many. The Common Cup fulfills this symbolism beautifully.

THE WORDS OF CHRIST

But even more important than the symbol are the actual words of Christ and the real presence of Christ in this Supper. It is clear from all four Scripture accounts of the institution of the Lord's Supper that Christ took a single cup, gave thanks over it and instructed all of his disciples to "drink from it."

Matthew 26:27-28 Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

Mark 14:23 Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

Luke 22:20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

1 Corinthians 11:25 In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

In Scripture, the Sacrament of the Altar is so closely tied to the use of "the cup" that the word "wine" is never even mentioned in connection with the Lord's Supper (although, from the context, we are 100% certain that grape wine was the content of the cup). Here is another reference:

1 Corinthians 11:26-28 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

Now, there are three questions we must answer. First, does the real presence of Jesus' blood in this Sacrament (and thus, the forgiveness of sins!) depend on the kind of vessel that is used? The answer is, no. When the Word of Christ is spoken over the bread and wine that says, "This is my body; This is my blood," nothing in the world can make the Word of Christ invalid. All the wine on the altar is blessed with the Words of Institution, consecrated, set aside for sacred use. Christ's blood is really present in, with and under the wine, no matter what vessel contains it.

As our Small Catechism says, "'Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.' These words, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament. Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: 'forgiveness of sins.'"

Second, is it completely incompatible with Christ's command to use Individual Cups? In other words, is it sinful? Are we bringing guilt on

ourselves in the very Sacrament that is intended to erase guilt? Again, the answer is no. 1) Bread, 2) wine, 3) the Words of institution, 4) a called pastor who administers the body and blood of Christ, and 5) communicants who receive them – those are the essential elements in the Lord's Supper which absolutely must be retained among Christians in order to celebrate the Sacrament according to Christ's institution.

It's important to view the Sacrament rightly. The Roman Catholic understanding of the Mass is that it is man's sacrifice to God, man's work done for God to merit the forgiveness of sins. But the Lutheran, Scriptural teaching of the Mass is that it is entirely God's work done for us. We are on the receiving (the "drinking") end, not the giving (the "pouring out") end. Christ did not set up another Law in this Sacrament, as if, by our meticulous obedience, we earned his forgiveness, or as if, by our failure to observe the non-essential details of the institution, we incurred His wrath. "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Romans 10:4). The only "service" we render to God in the Sacrament is the worship of faith – faith in his words that we are truly receiving his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. By faith in Christ, who did all things in the right way for us, we are rescued from the burden of having to do the right things in the right way in order to become righteous before God.

So it is neither a "good work of the Law" to use the Chalice, nor is it a "sinful work under the Law" to use Individual Cups. We are not rendering to God our service in the Sacrament. On the contrary, he is handing out the benefits of His service to us.

Finally, we have to ask the question, is it fully consistent with Christ's command to use Individual Cups? Are we following exactly the pattern that Christ set for us, the pattern that his Church has observed for almost 2000 years? Here we must frankly answer, no. "Drink from it, all of you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

While the vessel of distribution is not an essential part of the Sacrament, it is not an entirely insignificant part, either, because of Jesus' words. His words are everything. They matter. He could have said, "This wine is the new covenant in my blood." He could have said, "The wine in these cups is the new covenant in my blood." But instead, he chose – in every single Scripture reference – to refer to "the cup" from which we are to drink.

We are not minimalists in the Lutheran Church. We don't ask the question, "How little do we have to do to follow Christ's words and institution in order to have a valid Sacrament?" Instead, we simply stay as close to his words as possible, and rejoice in the blessings we receive through them.

The use of a Common Cup matches exactly the practice that Jesus instituted on the night he was betrayed and follows his words to the letter. The use of Individual Cups, while not sinful, is still not fully consistent with the practice Christ instituted.

OUR FELLOWSHIP WITH ONE ANOTHER

As you may remember from catechism/confirmation classes, there is both a vertical communion and a horizontal communion that take place in the Sacrament of the Altar – a communion of each individual with Christ, and a communion of all individuals with their fellow communicants.

Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread."

This is also stated beautifully in our Lutheran Confessions:

Consider this true, almighty Lord, our Creator and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, after the Last Supper. He is just beginning His bitter suffering and death for our sins. In those sad last moments, with great consideration and

solemnity, He institutes this most venerable Sacrament. It was to be used until the end of the world with great reverence and obedience <humility>. It was to be an abiding memorial of His bitter suffering and death and all His benefits. It was a sealing <and confirmation> of the New Testament, a consolation of all distressed hearts, and a firm bond of unity for Christians with Christ, their Head, and with one another. (Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration: Art. VII, 44).

Our American culture emphasizes individualism and independence. But the Sacrament of the Altar does the opposite. It pulls us away from ourselves into a very real experience of unity and oneness, as all the individual believers come together to drink from the cup of Christ. Here no one is better or worse than another; no one is too good to drink from the same cup as his fellow believer, and no one is not good enough. All are one in Christ.

The Common Cup displays the striking reality of this oneness as we leave our individualism behind and, for a brief moment, come together around the cup of Christ. We return to our seats with an unavoidable realization of our oneness in the body of Christ. Our spiritual oneness is invisible, intangible. But that spiritual oneness is acted out visibly and tangibly when all drink from the one cup of Christ.

The same is really true of the bread. While the bread is cut into many wafers, all those wafers are gathered together in one place. They touch one another. There is no separation between them.

But the wine in the Individual Cups is kept completely separate from one cup to the next. One never touches the other. Individual Cups continue to foster the false notion that we are nothing more than a bunch of separate individuals coming forward to receive our own individual meal, and then go back to our seats just as separated from one another as before, perhaps even thankful that we didn't have to drink from the same cup as

our fellow members. This hardly fits the reality of what is going on in the Sacrament.

One of the founding fathers of the Lutheran Church, Martin Chemnitz, sharply criticized the 15th Century Roman Catholic theologians for giving in to this notion that Christians may not wish to drink from the same cup as their fellow Christians. One reason why the Council of Constance (1414-1418) chose to withhold the cup entirely from the laity was that “it might, as it were, become unappetizing for many to drink, when many others had drunk before.” Chemnitz responded, “It is evident, therefore, that the church has now become quite dainty, seeing that antiquity often reiterates that the sign and token of the church's unity is that one cup is offered for all, as Chrysostom says” (Examination of the Council of Trent, Vol. 1, p. 370).

THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH AND THE MOVE AWAY FROM IT

The simple truth is that for nearly 1900 years of church history, Individual Cups were unknown. Only a Common Cup was used in the Christian Church – in every church and in every denomination that observed the Lord’s Supper. It’s not as if all those Christians were incapable of figuring out a way to individualize the distribution of Christ’s blood. And it’s not as if those Christians didn’t have to deal with issues of hygiene. They simply rejected the concept of “individualization.” Everyone in the church drank from the Chalice. They did it for a reason, because it was perfectly consistent with Christ’s words and with their belief and confession regarding the Sacrament. Why would they ever do anything else?

The answer is that in the late 1800’s, some Reformed churches began introducing Individual Cups. The Reformed churches rejected (and still reject) the real presence of the true body and blood of

Christ in the Sacrament, so for them, there is no real communion taking place; only a symbolic meal of remembrance. They believe Jesus meant to say, “This represents my body; this represents my blood.” They deny the very essence of the Sacrament by denying the presence of the body and blood of Christ in, with and under the bread and wine. In effect, they have no Sacrament!

So since the Reformed already empty Jesus’ words of their literal meaning in the Sacrament, they do not mind changing other aspects of its institution, including the substituting of grape juice for the wine, since alcohol can be abused.

The use of grape juice was common among the Reformed by the late 1800’s, and some began to fear that, without the alcohol content, there might be more of a chance of germs being passed from person to person, so they introduced Individual Cups, and the practice caught on as a matter of concern over hygiene. This change was perfectly consistent with their Reformed theology, because, since the body and blood of Christ are not present, there is no real communion taking place, neither between believers and Christ, nor between believers and one another.

By the mid 1900’s, Lutheran churches, influenced by the concerns over hygiene and spurred on by American pragmatism, were slowly beginning to adopt the practice of using Individual Cups, so that, by the late 1980’s, most Lutheran churches were at least using Individual Cups as an option alongside the Common Cup. In these cases, the Lutheran churches took a minimalist approach to Holy Communion, and allowed the Reformed practice to influence their own. The problem is, practice carries theology along with it!

In all honesty, the past 50 to 60 years have largely been an era of “experimentation” for Lutherans in the United States, an era in which the historic practices of the Church have been downplayed, criticized, and, in

many cases, abandoned in favor of “trying something new,” either to “blend in better with the culture” or to be more “pragmatic,” or simply out of boredom with traditions they never understood. This infatuation with innovation has affected Communion practices, worship practices, and evangelism practices, to the point that even our very theological underpinnings are jeopardized. More often than not, the wisdom of our elders has proven to be wiser than our presumptuous innovations. We shouldn’t have been so quick to assume that we were wiser than the Church that has gone before us.

Is hygiene really something we should be concerned about in using the Common Cup? 1900 years worth of Christians say, “No, fellow saints of God! Don’t be so dainty!”

Modern scientific studies also say, “No!” These studies have shown that the alcohol content of the wine combined with the precious metal of the Common Cup (silver or gold plating, in our case) combined with the wiping of the cup (with Everclear) after each person drinks from it make it nearly impossible to transmit diseases this way. The same studies have shown no rise in sickness among church members who use the Common Cup as opposed to those who use Individual Cups. Everyone gets sick, but the Common Cup isn’t to blame.

And most importantly of all, the Lord Jesus says, “No, you don’t have to be afraid that I will hurt you.” We believe that it is more than bread and wine that we are receiving in the Sacrament. We are receiving Jesus himself. Jesus gave “the cup” to his beloved Church, his Bride, not to harm her but to heal her. The only ones harmed by receiving the Sacrament are those who eat and drink in an “unworthy manner,” that is, without faith in Jesus’ words. Do we really believe that the same Lord who said, “Drink from it, all of you,” is incapable of preserving us from physical harm when we follow his words? Let us have faith in Jesus!

LINING UP OUR PRACTICE WITH OUR CONFESSION

There is one more reason why we will be introducing the Common Cup, and it has to do with our public confession. As we have seen, the Reformed churches use Individual Cups for a reason. They deny the presence of the blood of Christ and the efficacy of the words of Christ. We do not agree with them. On the contrary, “Our churches teach that the body and blood of Christ are truly present and distributed to those who eat the Lord’s Supper. They reject those who teach otherwise” (Augsburg Confession: Article X).

Since we reject the Reformed teaching regarding the Sacrament and since we believe the opposite of what the Reformed believe about this Sacrament, then it hardly makes sense for us to imitate their practice, as if we, like them, confessed the absence of Jesus’ body and blood in the Sacrament.

And since we confess that it is the true blood of Jesus that is present in this Sacrament, do we learn reverence for our King and confess the presence of the King better with a goblet of gold or with disposable plastic cups? Our public confession both announces to the world what we believe and reinforces among ourselves what we believe. If we wish to line up our practice with our confession, then it is clear that a Common Cup is the better choice.

This document has been written by Lutheran Pastor Rydecki (Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Las Cruces, NM) with slight adjustments for the context at St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Clarence Center, NY by Pastor Zech.

