

THE INDIVIDUAL CUP; ITS USE AT HOLY COMMUNION¹

The earliest record I can find of the use of the Individual Cup is in the U.S.A. in the last decade of last century. It was introduced purely on grounds of hygiene at a time when public health and the combating of infectious diseases had come to the forefront. Its use was developed in a new country where men as yet set more store by things new and modern than by things ancient and traditional. In bringing in this innovation no one apparently argued that the use of small cups was nearer to the Passover usage or that it expressed a fundamental doctrine of the Faith or might be construed to do so. The innovation was based on hygiene.

Even in U.S.A., but much more in Scotland, the innovation made slow progress. Most people saw in it a serious departure from the use and wont of the Catholic Church. Many who were unable to formulate doctrinal objections were offended by the substitution of a rather irreverent, new fangled method in place of what, to put it at its lowest, was a beautiful piece of symbolism, rendered the more sacred by memories of services of the Lord's Supper held often in the open air, often in quiet country kirks, often in great town churches and cathedrals throughout the land, where the worshippers received the wine in cups from which generations of worshippers had received Holy Communion. In the Church of Scotland matters came to a head in 1906 when the Presbytery of Glasgow overtured the General Assembly for a ruling on the use of the Individual Cup. The practice had been adopted by three congregations in Glasgow and the Presbytery wished to know the legal position. In 1878 the General Assembly had allowed ministers discretion in the use of unfermented wine. The Presbytery wondered if a similar discretionary use would be permitted in the use of the Individual Cup. The General Assembly appointed a special committee which reported in 1908, but its report was not unanimous. A minority report was given in by Professor Cooper.

The report showed that 21 parishes had to date adopted the Individual Cup, while three were using spoons. The reasons for these departures from use and wont were "the desire to avoid the risk of infection and a wish to spare the feelings of those who shrink from a promiscuous use of the same cup by 50 or 60, or possibly more people". The general feeling was that

seemliness was being preserved and that the innovation did away with the habit of "passing the cup". Only in one case did the committee report disharmony and displeasure and absenting oneself from the Lord's Supper because of the introduction of the Individual Cup. The committee could see no objection to the Individual Cup in principle or in the law of the Church of Scotland and therefore urged a permissive use. The committee recommended that the method of administering the wine be left to the discretion of the minister, provided the harmony and peace of the congregation be not disturbed, and always subject to the control of the Presbytery.

The Minority Report, however, saw in this innovation a departure from the original institution of the sacrament, and this throughout the ensuing debate remained the chief argument used by opponents of the Individual Cup. Christ, it was argued, used one cup after the meal and handed it to the apostles to drink from. Cyprian and Calvin were quoted to stress that we must adhere strictly to our Lord's command and example.

It was pointed out that the innovation had no precedent in the history of the whole Church. As early as 110 A.D. the symbolism of the Common Cup was emphasised by Ignatius who said, "for one is the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one the chalice in unity of his Blood". Uninterruptedly throughout Christendom the Communion of the Blood of Christ was ministered in a large cup, usually by the deacon. The Minority Report saw this innovation as a departure from the law of the Church of Scotland, noting that in the Westminster Confession Christ's "ministers are to pray and bless the elements of Bread and Wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to a holy use, and they (communicating also themselves) to give both to the communicants"² and the Directory which requires that the wine be "set on the Table in large cups".³ It was illegal to have introduced the Individual Cup without having previously received the permission of the church courts. The permission to use unfermented wine could not be extended to cover an innovation affecting a fundamental element of the sacramental action . . . taking, blessing and giving and receiving. The innovation, it was argued, would destroy the unity of observance throughout the church and spoil what should be a feast of Christian brotherhood. "It is not good that one should fear another. It is worse if a poor brother is made to feel that a richer one fears his presence and his sharing the cup of brotherhood".

The alleged danger to health, the Minority Report said, had never been proved and appears to be greatly exaggerated. The Bishop of London said the other day that "after careful

consultation with the best doctors, he found the danger is regarded as absolutely infinitesimal, and no one ought to allow any such fear to prevent him from coming".⁴ Moreover, such danger as there is meets one daily in almost every action of social life — in the passing of coin and bank notes, and even in the grasp of a friend's hand. Much of what the innovation sought to achieve could be achieved by more frequent celebrations of the Lord's Supper as has been recommended over and over again by the General Assembly; by ministers and elders taking good heed and care that such sick persons as come to receive this sacrament . . . communicate last . . . or by communicating sick persons in their own homes or in times of plague or infection by the General Assembly authorising Communion by intinction or by the spoon, or tube, for all which practices there are precedents in the early Church".

Professor Cooper and his followers also feared that the introduction of the Individual Cup might lead to "tampering" with the sacrament. The case of the Barclay U.F. Church, Edinburgh, was cited where simultaneous Communion had been introduced, the elements being set out in individual containers in the pews before the service commenced.

The General Assembly of 1908 received the Report, but in view of the "limited" nature of the inquiry made by the committee decided to remit the whole question to an enlarged committee of 56 members for fuller investigation and subsequent report under four heads, viz; 1. The Critical, Doctrinal and Historical Aspects of the Question. 2. The Legal Aspect. 3. A Medical Report. 4. The General Feeling of the Church. In 1909 this enlarged committee brought forward its report which proved to be a very full document.

Once again there was a Minority Report which was characterised by a scholarly approach.

The Report itself argued that St Matthew 26: 27 should according to the oldest MSS. read "Having taken a cup" and that "drink of it" could well refer to the wine and not the cup. It argued that in I Corinthians 11: 25 "as oft as ye drink it" should read "as oft as ye drink". The N.T. text gave no indication as to the mode of drinking the wine. The title "cup of blessing" showed that the sacramental cup was either the third or fourth cup of the Passover at which small cups, one for each person, were used. However at the Kiddush it was definitely the custom for all to drink from the same cup. The committee felt that the change from individual cups to a common cup was possibly made during the second century A.D. when concern began to appear lest any of the consecrated elements be spilt.

They admitted that the common cup creates a deep sense of brotherhood but felt that this is equally well expressed by all eating of the one consecrated bread.

On the legal aspect the committee decided that there is no authoritative ruling in the matter. Past usage does not constitute church law to the extent of excluding modifications such as the individual cup. The Church may make rules as to the manner of administering the wine as seems good to her.

In the light of conflicting medical evidence submitted the committee decided that there is danger to health from the use of the common cup and do not accept the view that the risk of infection is negligible. They emphasised the medico-psychological aspect of the question as being of great importance . . . many communicants are affected by only temporary antipathy to the sacrament, but in every congregation there are those especially women of sensitive natures to whom the common cup is painful. A census of church opinion showed that 28 parishes felt the need for departure from the use of the common cup. 776 wanted no change. In answer to the question, "Do you think that the individual cup should be permitted in congregations that desire it?" 500 answered in the affirmative; 155 in the negative and 155 gave no reply.

Summing up, the committee concluded that there was no evidence to justify the prohibition of the individual cup, but they emphasised that dangers to health from the use of the common cup were often exaggerated. They regretted any occasion of departing from the beautiful, ancient and seemly custom of administering the wine and recommended that before the individual cup is resorted to, every effort should be first made to remove cause for offence. The Report said the individual cup at least allows a sick person to communicate with others with a clear conscience. The mode of distributing the elements falls to the minister subject to the control of the presbytery.

A Minority Report, again presented by Professor Cooper, claimed that the Report's exegesis of N.T. passages was forced and erroneous and was in opposition to the interpretation of them held sacred by centuries of Christian scholarship and devotion. Its main argument was that definitely after the Supper or Passover our Lord took one cup and caused the apostles to drink from it. St Mark makes it perfectly clear that they all drank from one cup (14: 23) and I Corinthians 11: 21 is specific by repeating three times the phrase "*touto to potérion*". The Church has no right to weaken the symbolism which Christ commanded. She needs more than ever to be reminded of

Christ's words at the institution "that ye love one another" (St John 15: 12).

The suggestion that the individual cup was used during the first three centuries A.D. was felt to be purely conjectural. The pictures in the Catacombs show large cups and communicants drinking from one cup. In all churches the common cup has been in use for centuries. The earliest known use of the individual cup being 1896.

With regard to the legal aspect, the fact that the statutes of the church contain no direction prohibiting the individual cup does not sanction the innovation but rather forbids it, because it was obviously always assumed that there was only one way of administering the wine, namely in large cups.

This Minority Report condemned the Report because it sanctioned division in the church and even within a single congregation in the matter which stands at the heart of the church's life. It dismissed the medical evidence as inconclusive and rejected the census of church opinion as a method of reaching a decision concerning this innovation. In the General Assembly of 1909 the question was hotly debated. Finally 145 voted in favour of the Minority Report, 240 in favour of a compromise motion which stood half way between the Committee's Report and the Minority Report, but gave no cordial welcome to the individual cup. It read:

"The General Assembly see no sufficient reason for departing from the ancient and uniform practice of the Church in the administration of the Lord's Supper — so expressive and solemn and endeared by hallowed associations of centuries; but in view of the information on various aspects of the subject submitted in the Report, they do not feel justified in forbidding the individual cup, much as they regret the introduction of a practice so novel and in many respects so undesirable. The General Assembly at the same time charge ministers and presbyteries to see that the harmony and peace of congregations are not disturbed over this holy ordinance and that those who desire it shall always have as convenient means and opportunity of partaking in the manner heretofore in use."

The Procurator ruled that the individual cup was illegal according to church law, but his ruling was ignored and the foregoing motion became the deliverance of the General Assembly on the use of the individual cup.

We note that expediency and compromise guided the fathers and brethren to a decision which they accepted certainly without enthusiasm and perhaps not with intense conviction. In the intervening years the use of the individual cup has made

widespread progress, thanks largely to unremitting commercial advertising and the timely or untimely actions of do-gooding donors who up and down the country presented congregations with individual communion cups usually designed in utilitarian rather than artistic manner. Thousands of communicants have never known any other mode of distribution of the wine and some moving to another parish would be so put off by the prospect of receiving from the common cup that they might choose to travel some distance to another church where the individual cup is in use. To many younger people the whole question of individual or common cup seems irrelevant now. For them the manner in which the wine is administered is a completely secondary matter which does not affect the validity of the sacrament. The intention to fulfil Christ's command in celebrating the Lord's Supper, personal faith and the real presence of Christ in the sacrament are what matter. There can be different ways of distributing the wine. Others would argue that the use of the individual cup is a natural development in the social history of our people. Hygiene has altered many aspects of cooking and retailing food. Medical research has isolated many germs and viruses. We have moved a long way from Reformation times when people normally drank from the same banqueting cup or humbler people ate from a common dish of meat without using cutlery.

At the same time there have always been those who disapprove of and dislike the individual cup and these are by no means confined to the stupidly conservative or unrealistically aesthetic. A reasoned and consistent stand was taken by the Scottish Church Society which until the 1930s excluded from its membership any minister who used the individual cup. The Society's theology of the common cup was defined by the publication of Dr Cromarty Smith's booklet: "The Cup of Blessing". According to this view the use of the individual cup is a breach of Christ's command at the institution of the Supper and it divides men instead of uniting them. The fear of contagion is unworthy in a faithful communicant. "If we trust God for eternity, can we not trust Him for His present care? If for our souls, can we not for our poor bodies? How could the Lord in His own sacrament do us harm? Our opportunities to be lowly with Christ are not over many. Let us do joyfully what He bade, He who for our sakes became poor and sat at meat with publicans and sinners."⁵

The reiteration of the words "the cup" in the Scriptural accounts of the institution are significant. *The blood is the life* in Hebrew thought and in setting forth the cup as He has

commanded the Church sets forth the memorial of His sacrificial death. There is one sacrifice for sin. There is one Lord. There is one cup. All the faithful are made to drink of one Spirit. "Dare we shatter this sacred symbolism? The cup signifies for us that Christ is the only Author of life. From Him alone flows the life blood which cleanses from sin, dare we break it into a crowd of vessels which signify nothing intelligible? To change the symbol is to change the sense."⁶

We now review this controversy at some distance in time. We must try to look objectively at the question whether the use of the individual cup is permissible and if permissible desirable. The individual cup has created a division within the Church of God and even within particular congregations. The General Assemblies of 1908 and 1909 in a sense kept the peace but shattered the unity of the Church in its rulings with regard to the administration of Holy Communion. Some will say there can be unity without uniformity. This is true, but not surely in the context of how the wine is administered. Christ did not leave us completely free with regard to sacramental practice. He said, **THIS DO**. He gave a command and instituted a sacrament whose symbolism is very simple, but basically unalterable because given by Him. In the words of the poet John Donne,

"He was the Word that spake it.
He took the bread and brake it.
And what that word did make it,
I do believe and take it."

Our primary concern then must be not with hygiene but to ask what exactly Christ commands us to do with regard to the wine in the Lord's Supper. This is decisive. If, following Jeremias, we accept that the Lord's Supper was instituted at a celebration of the Passover and that Christ blessed and handed to His apostles a common cup, bidding them all drink from the one cup: we see that drinking from the same cup and breaking the same loaf are fundamental eucharistic actions which cannot be departed from without failing to fulfil our Lord's command **THIS DO**. Jeremias has shown that the use of individual cups at the Passover was introduced on grounds of hygiene after Christ's time, but that on festal occasions the cup, over which grace after the meal had been said, was handed round to let everyone share in the benediction. This view is supported by the analagous treatment of the bread: the bread over which the blessing had been said was broken so that every guest could share in the blessing by eating a piece.⁷

This would suggest that in order to be the Eucharist, at least the minister and elders who are assisting him must receive from the common cup, even if the congregation receives from individual cups. This seems to rule out celebrations where even

the presiding minister and assisting elders receive from individual cups. It also rules out celebrations where individual pieces of bread and cups are set out in the pews before the service and Christ's command to take, bless and share is disobeyed. The celebration of the Passover at which the Lord's Supper was instituted averaged ten persons.⁸ It was a simple matter for a small group to share the one cup. Celebration of the Lord's Supper in small groups is likely to increase among us and is most meaningful. Here the common cup symbolism is most effective. The trouble arises when many persons have to be communicated and all cannot drink from the same cup. The Scottish Reformers do not seem to have had any difficulty in the matter. Knox is credited with celebrating at Kilmacolm with a pair of inverted candlesticks as chalices.⁹ Certainly no care was taken to preserve and continue in use the mediaeval chalices which met strange fates. Stirling sold two to repair the streets and Aberdeen sold a quantity of church plates to the highest bidder.¹⁰ The oldest communion cups we have are *mazers* which were formerly used as grace cups. Each College, Corporation, Guild or notable family possessed at least one. These were handed round social gatherings each guest drinking out of the same cup to symbolise the family feeling of brotherly love and goodwill.¹¹

Thus Scottish people of the sixteenth century found it perfectly natural to receive the wine in a common cup and saw in so doing a close bond of fellowship with Christ and with other believers. This all fitted the times and their understanding of the manner of Christ's presence in the sacrament. There was no harking back to the practice of receiving the wine from the chalice by means of a tube or spilling a little of the consecrated wine into a chalice of unconsecrated wine to give the people communion or of using a spoon to communicate or of withholding the cup from the laity, all of which had been practised somewhere at some time in the Universal Church. Christ's command THIS DO must be fulfilled. All must receive in both kinds and the common cup, even if several such were needed, seemed the obvious way. It had not been hygiene but fear of spilling the Precious Blood which had dictated past evasions of giving the cup to everyone and now that it was understood that worthy believers received the Blood after a spiritual manner this difficulty was overcome. For long enough many parishes did not possess any cups and had to borrow from others. For long periods the Lord's Supper was all too infrequently celebrated. Yet the Scottish Church was quite clear as to what the sacrament meant and the bare simplicity of the

Calvinist rite, enriched by the finely designed silver cups which appeared in the 18th century, made the occasion liturgically memorable. Von Allmen says that "a eucharistic liturgy which is not patently beautiful casts a kind of doubt on Christ's presence there".¹² Individual cups can be used with reverence and dignity but alas the effect is often otherwise—tossing glasses, squeaking boots, clinking trays, and if children are to be admitted to communion further difficulty can be envisaged in handing round the trays. As celebrations become more frequent the Church may move away from the "mass rally" type of service with cards, pens, cloths, elders' duties and formal dress to something more beautiful, quieter and deeply spiritual, where communicants sharing a common loaf and cup are brought into Holy Communion with Christ and with one another. Had the injunction of the General Assembly of 1825 forbidding the administration Holy Communion in the pews and insisting on the retention of the long tables been enforced then the individual cup would most likely never have found an entrance into the Church of Scotland, as the people continued to come up and sit at the table fulfilling as nearly as possible Christ's command THIS DO. Once communion was administered in the pews and the individual cup came in, receptionist views of the sacrament filtered in too, and Presbyterianism sailed near English Nonconformity, drifting away from her anchorage in what the Scots Confession said about the real presence of Christ's Body and Blood and viewed as an alien land the sacramental teaching of the Christian Church across the ages.

It is not too late to profit by mistakes. The individual cup remains an innovation — it is not part of the living body of the Christian Church.

Thus, assessing the controversy now, we cannot dismiss the whole question as irrelevant, for the use of the individual cup is too closely involved in the theology of the Eucharist and especially in the expression of that unity of which the participation in the Eucharist ought to be the most visible symbol.

Those who have advocated the use of the individual cup have for the most part failed to grasp the *anamnēsis* aspect of the Eucharist — the setting forth before God and men of the memorial which Christ has commanded. They have failed to understand the supreme spiritual significance of *the action*. They have stressed *the reception*, emphasising that each individual faithful communicant receives the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ (although not infrequently this may have been construed to mean just spiritual fellowship with a Risen

Saviour). It is hard in retrospect to determine where fastidiousness ended and genuine concern about hygiene began. Certainly, as the General Assembly said, other remedies for hygiene could well have been tried instead of grudgingly adopting an innovation which for many disrupted the symbolism of the sacramental action and broke Christ's command. Today, if we still had only the common cup in use and strong agitation were to arise about hygiene, it is not likely that the individual glasses would be adopted. The use of drinking straws, tubes or spoons would probably be proposed.

On the other hand those who opposed the innovation were not quite honest in their stress on "use and wont" in the post-Reformation Church of Scotland and on what usage is implied in the Church's Standards. There was no strenuous endeavour to fulfil Christ's institution to the letter regarding the wine. Things were much more casual and the large cups were in part at least suggested by the secular practice of the times. Nor did they face up to the fact that once more than one large cup is used, the symbolism of drinking from the one cup is impoverished.

Nevertheless, the important point in the whole dispute is surely that apart from all points of hygiene or of post-Reformation Church law, the present day Church is duty bound to endeavour to fulfil Christ's command. Neither the Bread nor the Wine nor both together is the Sacrament.

The whole eucharistic action is the sacrament. Therefore what we do with the elements and how we handle them is of crucial theological importance. Our actions here have to be dictated by Scripture, by the faith and practice of the Catholic Church and by a sincere desire to maintain the visible unity of the Church especially in the Eucharist which by its very nature ought to be the chief visible expression of Christian unity and the chief means whereby the Church in her unity is renewed and recreated again and again.

In the contemporary situation we have to say to those who see no offence in the individual cup that the Eucharist is a mystery. The superstitious can be excluded from our interpretation of the rite but not the mystical. In the words of Dr H. J. Wotherspoon, "The whole transaction of the Sacrament takes place, not as an episode of earthly event, but on the plane of our Lord's present existence; it is among the *epourania*, the Heavenlies, in which the conditions of our fleshly existence do not apply, and all is as Christ sees it and as Christ wills. It is not the Elements — it is we and the whole action and the Elements in the setting of that action which are taken into the atmosphere of the supernal: We are 'lifted up into some apprehension of the

Eternal': we taste the powers of the coming age and look upon the invisible. It is no objection that such a statement is mystical — if it were not, it could not hope to be true: the sacramental cannot be discussed in material terms — it is only in mystical apprehension that faith can approach some literality of understanding."¹³

Today we are grateful that the Church of Scotland has never tied herself down to Calvin's or anyone else's definition of how the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ are present in the Lord's Supper, but has repeatedly, simply and boldly said to her people: This is my Body . . . this cup is the new covenant in my Blood. Thereby she has left the flood-gates open for each communicant to explore for himself through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, the height and depth and length and breadth of the glorious reality. Anything that would needlessly diminish or detract from that reality must be shunned. It seems to many of us that this is exactly what the individual cup does. It is in danger of reducing a mystery to something too near the level of the toast glasses handed round at the wedding reception or the tray of medicine glasses taken round the beds of the hospital ward.

In these latter years we have been reproaching ourselves with neglect of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. As we study and pray about the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, we shall surely see that, leaving aside all questions of hygiene, textual criticism and church law, we must strive to grasp what the Holy Spirit does in the Administration of the Consecrated Bread and Wine. We are, or at least many of us still are, rightly proud of the ancient Scottish tradition of the *epiclesis* in the prayer of consecration at the Eucharist. Therefore, let us never write down to an earthly level what the discerning of all ages have termed a translation into the heavenly realm when the Holy Spirit has been called down upon us and upon God's own gifts of bread and wine.

NOTES

1. Presidential Address delivered to the Society at Greyfriars' House, Edinburgh, on Thursday, 25th May 1978.
2. W.C.F., chapter 29, paragraph 3.
3. D.P.W., Of the Celebration of the Communion, or Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.
4. Church Times, 10.4.08.
5. The Cup of Blessing, p. 16.
6. Op. cit., p. 14.
7. Jeremias: The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, p. 69.
8. Jeremias, op. cit., p. 47.
9. Burnet: The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland, p. 3.
10. Macmillan: The Worship of the Scottish Reformation, 1550-1638, p. 239.
11. Macmillan, op. cit., p. 241.
12. Von Allmen: The Lord's Supper, p. 59.
13. H. J. Wotherspoon, Religious Values in the Sacraments, p. 283.

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