

Individual communion cups, community and COVID-19

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There are many things that have changed radically in our lives since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chief among them in many Anglican churches has been the suspension of the celebration of Holy Eucharist and in-person worship more broadly. Since March, churches have closed their physical doors and opened them virtually, experimenting with new ways to worship together while physically apart. It has been a time of intense liturgical creativity and experimentation, but also a time of deep longing for our physical church spaces and the sacraments we celebrate in them. As provinces begin to allow the resumption of religious services, church leaders are beginning to discuss what worship will look like when we are able to gather physically once more. Much like in the early days of this pandemic in February and March, many of these conversations have revolved around the Eucharist and how to celebrate it safely. One of the practices at issue is the use of the common cup—should it be used at all, should it be replaced with individual communion cups, or should communion “in one kind” be the norm? While there is much that can and has been said about each of these questions, this essay will examine the issue of individual communion cups.¹

¹ For discussion around the celebration of the Eucharist at the beginning of the pandemic, see Michael Curry, “On Our Theology of Worship,” March 31, 2020, <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-word-church-our-theology-worship>; Ruth A. Meyers, “Spiritual Communion in a Season of Social Distancing,” April 2020, <https://cdsp.edu/2020/04/spiritual-communion-in-a-season-of-social-distancing/>; Eileen Scully, “On This Eucharistic Fast,” March 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53339102e4b00c509597c34c/t/5e85e228feaa3720119219d/1585832489027/On+this+Eucharistic+Fast.pdf>; and Jesse Zink, “Discerning the Body: Eucharistic fasting and COVID-19,” March 31, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53339102e4b00c509597c34c/t/5e85dacfbcad235295b5854b/1585830609333/Zink%2C+Discern+the+BodyDiscerner+le+Corps+%281%29.pdf>.

The historical origin these cups is in the sanitary reform movement of the nineteenth century. As germ theory took hold in the medical community, public health authorities took steps to reduce the transmission of disease among the public. Common drinking cups in public locations such as schools and train stations were discontinued as part of these reforms.

Religious leaders looked to the common cup used in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist as a site of germ transmission, and the late nineteenth century saw a growing theological debate about the use of individual or common cups.² By the 1890s the use of these individual cups was spreading throughout the United States, and had moved into Canada by the first decade of the twentieth century.³ While the desire to prevent disease transmission through the common cup was often the primary reason supporters presented in favor of individual cups, there were other more problematic justifications for their use.

The rise of the sanitary reform movement and debates about individual communion cups accompanied increasing immigration and the growth of the American middle class. White middle class Americans sought to establish boundaries between themselves and their broader, increasingly diverse society, in part, through attempts to ensure physical purity. In other words, “cleanliness is next to godliness” became a way to equate physical health with moral superiority, and to exclude certain members of society seen as “unclean”—primarily Blacks, immigrants, Indigenous people, the poor, and other social outcasts—from the ideal community envisioned by the white middle class.⁴ Put in the words of a periodical at the time urging clergy to join a sanitary society, “physical and moral uncleanness are inseparable.”⁵ Some pro- common cup church leaders at the time recognized this tendency and argued against it. The most vocal of them, James Buckley, wrote that the use of individual cups would lead to “the formation of caste churches, the freezing out of such as were disagreeable, and the reducing of religious societies to clubs in which any member should be permitted to blackball unsatisfactory applicants.”⁶ While individual communion cups were connected to a real concern for the

² Betty A. O'Brien, “The Lord’s Supper: Traditional Cup of Unity or Innovative Cups of Individuality,” *Methodist History* 32, no. 2 (January 1994): 80; Daniel Sack, *Whitebread Protestants: Food and Religion in American Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 32.

³ O'Brien, “The Lord’s Supper,” 81-2. For information on the Canadian incorporation of individual cups into worship, see *Reasons Why the Individual Cup Communion Service Should be Used in All Churches* (Toronto: Mail Job Printing Company, 1898).

⁴ Sack, *Whitebread Protestants*, 33-4.

⁵ Quoted in Sack, *Whitebread Protestants*, 34.

⁶ Quoted in Sack, *Whitebread Protestants*, 43.

transmission of illness at the time when germ theory was more widely accepted in the medical community, they were also part of an effort to connect physical and moral purity, and to create clear distinctions between who was part of the community, and who was not.

These troubling origins alone are reason enough to be wary about the incorporation of individual communion cups into our common life and worship. We have seen news reports of racist acts carried out against Asians and people of Asian descent in Canada and the United States, as well as racist terminology used in place of “coronavirus” or “COVID-19.”⁷ The implications of these actions are that the connections between physical difference, illness (real or imagined), and physical purity are not wholly gone from our society. In an effort to provide the Eucharist through individual cups, we risk embracing a practice with racist and classist origins.

The theological problem of individual cups lies in their very individuality. In his 1981 book *The Eucharistic Way*, bishop John Baycroft writes of the common cup, “we drink from a common cup as a strong symbol of unity and our willingness to accept each other. We share our love and lives as we share the cup. The implications of this for fellowship and support in the local church, for relationships between rich and poor in communities and nations, and for justice between North and South and first and third world countries are enormous. The cup of love and unity is unavoidably a cup of sacrifice.”⁸ Sharing the cup is an intimate action that may make us feel uncomfortable at the best of times. The common cup reminds us in an incarnational way that we are in relationship with those with whom we share it. In this reminder is also a challenge given to us at our baptism. The Eucharist calls us to remember the One Body into which we are brought at our baptism, and to act on that call through sharing the love of Christ in all aspects of our lives.⁹ The common cup calls us to the challenge of community in ways partaking of the bread—be it wafers or pieces from a shared loaf—does not. Replacing the common cup with individual cups risks losing this incarnational reminder of our shared baptismal vocation and our commitment to one another. Such a reminder is even more important in these days of increasing political polarization, in which it is easy to get caught up in “us” versus “them.”

⁷ For examples, see Jose A. Del Real, “With ‘kung flu,’ ‘thugs,’ and ‘our heritage,’ Trump leans on racial grievance as he reaches for a campaign reset,” *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/with-kung-flu-thugs-and-our-heritage-trump-leans-on-racial-grievance-as-he-reaches-for-a-campaign-reset/2020/06/21/945d7a1e-b3df-11ea-a510-55bf26485c93_story.html and Maryse Zeidler, “New poll reveals Chinese-Canadians’ experiences with racism,” *CBC*, June 22, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/new-poll-reveals-chinese-canadians-experiences-with-racism-1.5621261>

At the heart of the question about individual cups, in the nineteenth century and each time questions of the common cup have arisen since (often in times of public health crises) is the issue of Christian community and the Eucharistic feast. One of the hallmarks of Anglicanism is the importance of the incarnation in our theology. That God became human and dwelt among us is something foundational to our faith and, out of that, to our liturgical practice. That Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with actual bread and wine, that he ate and drank just as you and I do, and that we do this in remembrance of him are important ways that the incarnation continues to form our life as Christians. This is part of the reason why the loss of the Eucharist is felt so keenly by many during this pandemic, and why church leaders are seeking new and creative ways to welcome congregations back to the feast in a manner that is both physically safe and respectful of our theology and traditions.

The urge to use individual communion cups as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic is understandable. It comes from a deep longing for the Eucharist and, with it, a return to some sense of normalcy in a time in which everything seems to be upside down. Those desires in themselves are important pastoral needs to which church leaders must be sensitive. However, incorporating the use of individual cups brings into our liturgical life a practice that was in part developed in response to middle-class white anxieties about sharing the common cup with non-whites and those in poverty, as well as the harmful theology that equates physical and moral purity. The Eucharist is central to our Anglican liturgical practice, and its loss in this moment—perhaps when we need it most of all—is deep and painful for many. Yet we cannot risk celebrating this feast in such a way that it privileges the individual over the community, and lessens the challenge extended to each of us in our baptism, and of which we are reminded in the common cup. When we gather once more, let us be sure that our Eucharistic practices are not only physically safe, but that they also reflect the fullness of the hope and challenge given to us in the sacrament.