



COVID-19 and the Common Cup: A Matter of Custom?

To the matter of ceasing our practice of the common cup, and to the question as to why single-use cups cannot be used, The Very Rev. Ansley Tucker, diocesan administrator and dean of Christ Church Cathedral, responds:

You are absolutely right to ask if our Anglican insistence on the common cup is simply a matter of custom or is, rather, embedded in our theology. So, quite apart from an appeal to “the way we’ve always done it,” or even the fact that in England, for example, the use of individual cups is explicitly prohibited by canon law, here’s another go at our theological underpinnings.

In the case of the common cup, we are re-enacting the scriptural account of the Last Supper, where “when supper was ended, Jesus took the cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them...” This was an additional single cup, saved till the end of the meal, and shared by all—thought to be set aside in case Elijah should return before the meal was over. (Do you remember that old mostly rural custom of setting an extra place at the table, in case a wayfarer should arrive?) As Christians, we have re-interpreted this as the cup of Christ’s own life. So, our practice is rooted first in Christ’s own example.

Additionally, our use of a single chalice (and where possible, a single loaf) is rooted in our theological understanding that “we who are many are one Body for we all participate in the one bread” (one cup). This is why even when, for the sake of numbers, we need to decant some of the wine into a second chalice, there is to be only one chalice on the altar during the eucharistic prayer. It is a visual and real symbol of our unity in Christ—all of us bound together drinking from the same fountain of life.

Bishop John Baycroft, in his little book *The Eucharistic Way* adds, “We are also reminded by the one cup that we cannot drink it alone. We drink from a common cup as a strong symbol of unity and our willingness to accept each other...”

There is also a *practical* consideration stemming from our Anglican theology of the eucharistic presence that would argue against the use of individual cups, and this is our insistence that our eucharistic vessels are to be “abluted” following the reception of communion. This ensures that not even a drop of the consecrated wine is left unconsumed. This would mean, in the case of individual cups, that after the service, someone would have to pour a little water into every single cup that was used, and drink from them before they are washed for re-use. For obvious reasons, this is not a safe practice at this time.

(Some have noted that this doesn’t seem to trouble our full communion partners in the Lutheran Church. This is because Lutherans have a different view of the continuing presence of Christ in the sacrament than we do. Lutherans are happy to pour left over consecrated wine back into the bottle and consecrate it again next week. This would give Anglicans the hives!

But Lutherans are perfectly consistent: they wouldn't reserve the consecrated sacrament to take to the sick, as Anglicans do, either, because they don't believe that the bread remains a vehicle for the presence of Christ once the Sunday service is over. We do.)

Anglicans also hold to the doctrine of "concomitance"—this is the belief that Christ is not half present in the bread and half present in the wine, but wholly present in each. To receive in one kind only is to receive the fullness of the sacrament. This has been an age-long comfort to alcoholics who cannot receive wine, or to those who may be too ill to swallow bread.

All these things taken together have led Anglicans to the position that it is better not to offer the cup at all in a time such as this than to adopt a liturgical practice (multiple cups) that undercuts our theology of the eucharist.