

The Cup of Blessing:

An Analysis of 1 Cor. 10:16-17

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Introduction

“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 being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.”

1 Cor. 10:16-17, KJV

It is fair to say that no segment of Scripture is more crucial to the Christian's understanding of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper than the two verses which have just been quoted. The Gospel accounts of Christ's last meal certainly offer the same information, but in those passages the crucial point has to be intuited rather than read at a glance. And no doubt, although Chapter 11 of 1 Corinthians clarifies the penalties for not observing the Supper with due dignity, it does not lay down in specific terms *why* dignity is due. That *why* is answered in 1 Cor. 10:16-17. Specifically, the Sacrament gives Christians joint participation with Christ and the Church through faith in the figure of eating one broken Loaf and imbibing one poured-out Cup together.

In the present article, the reader will see the critical importance, based on what is taught in 1 Cor. 10:16-17, that the Cup of the Supper be literally one. This will require, (1), that the verses be exegeted carefully with consultation from major commentaries; (2), that the argument for the common cup which this exegesis implies be considered; and (3), that the objections to those arguments be recognized as inadequate. Each of these measures will be handled in turn.

Exegesis

There are four main angles from which Christians ought to consider the verses under consideration: (1) Context, (2) Text, (3) Translation, and (4) Commentary. This section will look at each of these in sequence.

Context

The general intention of the text that surrounds 1Cor. 10:16-17 is what is meant by *Context*.

Out of all of Paul's epistles, 1 Corinthians has the most defined structure. It is not a stream of consciousness like Romans, for example, which advances seamlessly from original sin to justification, election, and finally love for one's enemies and one's Christian brethren. Rather, in 1 Corinthians Paul lays out subject headings which are practically in bold font:

- **Unity:** "Now I beseech you, brethren... that there be no divisions among you" (ch. 1:10).
- **Sex:** "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me, 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman' " (ch. 7:1).
- **Idolatry:** "And as touching things sacrificed to idols..." (ch.8:1).
- **Church Ordinances:** "Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances..." (ch. 11:2)
- **The Resurrection:** "Moreover brethren, I declare unto you the Gospel which I preached unto you..." (ch. 15:1).

Given the apparent level of confusion and immaturity in the church at Corinth, it is not surprising that Paul would “dumb down” his more familiar style of weaving many side issues into a single uninterrupted theme. Yet this “heading style” allows the Bible student to readily identify the larger context for the verses in question. Namely, 1 Cor. 10:16-17 falls near the tail end of the section on Idolatry.

To recap, at the start of the Idolatry section in Chapter 8, Paul began by introducing his audience to the ethics of Christian conscience. Yes, idols are a ridiculous superstition, and yes, eating meats sacrificed to them is morally neutral in and of itself, since it’s all God’s creation anyway. But it is *wrong* to eat if it would encourage a weak Christian to sin against his conscience.

Continuing in Chapter 9, Paul explains the broader principle: Do everything you can to give the right impressions about the Gospel. Sure, if Paul wanted to tie the knot with a lady-friend in Ephesus, there was no moral law forbidding it. Sure, if he wanted to just sit pretty on the tithes and donations he raked in from Asia Minor and not do physical labor during his mission work, he could have done that. But he chose *not* to exercise those Christian liberties because they might have hindered the persuasive force of the Gospel message.

At the beginning of Chapter 10, Paul sidetracks into a warning from redemptive history. The Israelites were rescued from the Egyptians and brought into the visible Church, but most of them fell away—many by idolatry. And those Israelites were not offered a salvation different from ours; they ate the same spiritual meat and drank the same spiritual drink. Therefore, what happened to them should serve as a moral example to all Christians: “Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry” (v. 14).

One would be very surprised, then, if what followed did not track the running themes of Idolatry and protecting the conscience of others. And in fact, the theme of conscience is precisely something we find in verses 15-33. For example, observe verses 28-30:

“But if any man say unto you, this is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof: conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience? For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks?”

To be more specific, part of the intended meaning of verses 15 through 21 is that partaking of pagan meats effectively announces to the world that we as Christians have fellowship and communion with devils, just as eating of the sacrifices of the Old-Testament Altar announced oneself as a member of Israel's covenant-communion with Jehovah, and just as the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper announces oneself as being in fellowship and covenant-communion with Christ.

However, reading into the context *too* much may lead us to doubt the Calvinist doctrine that the Lord's Supper brings us *into* communion with Christ by faith, may lead us to cast our faith with the Zwinglian and Anabaptist teaching that the Supper is a mere badge of allegiance to Christianity. However, if Paul is read carefully, one will notice that he is quick to head off the assumption that sacrifices to idols are effectual. *Immediately* after using the examples of the Lord's Supper and the Old Testament sacrifices, he asks rhetorically, “What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing?” This is followed by a “but”—“But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God...” So Paul seems to be indirectly acknowledging that the Lord's Supper *is* effectual and that the Temple sacrifices *were* effectual whereas pagan rituals were not, thus affirming Calvinism and refuting Zwinglianism. While Paul *is* using the Sacrament's function as a badge of allegiance to make his main argument, he does not mean to exclude the Sacrament's function as a sign, seal, and means of grace. And bearing this has on verses 16 and 17 should be obvious; they represent statements that are not just limited to their context, but *absolute* statements about the very nature of the Sacrament. Whatever verses 16 and 17 might be teaching, it is a *universal* doctrine about the meaning of the Supper.

It is relevant, therefore, to pursue deeper exegesis from the angle of the *Text* of verses 16 and 17 themselves, to determine what verses 16 and 17 *do* teach.

Text

By *Text* is meant the actual statements of 1Cor. 10:16-17. These verses have already been quoted at the beginning of this essay, but they will be quoted again here so that the reader does not have to scroll back and forth through the entire document, or between his computer screen and his Bible.

[16] 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? [17] For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.
(1Cor. 10:16-17, KJV)

The reader will see later, under the heading “*Translation*,” that there are problems with how the King James Version translates verse 17, but for now the essay will limit itself to this commonly accepted rendition.

In these verses, there are basically three sentences or propositions:

1. The Cup and the Bread are the communion of the body and blood of Christ.
2. For we many are one bread and one body.
3. For we all partake of that one bread.

Regarding the first proposition, what is meant by the Cup and Bread being “the communion”? Is this not a circular statement within the flow of Paul’s argument? What does it add to the point he is making about the witness that our actions give to others, to say that the Cup and Bread *are* Communion?

Here, one must acknowledge that the word *communion* has come to mean in the English language something more than what the term originally signified. Today, English speakers most often use the term to refer to the Sacrament itself, and do not often talk about people being *in* “communion,” *i.e.* fellowship. But the latter meaning has always been a sense of the word, from the time when it first entered the English language in the 14th Century by way of the Old French term *communion* (which meant “community” or “fellowship”) to contemporary times when people speak about which Christian “communion” someone belongs to (by which we mean what is that person’s denomination, *e.g.* the Anglican “communion”). To make sense of Paul’s argument in 1Cor. 10:16 within the context of Chapters 8-10, the reader should understand the term *communion* in this more abstract sense of “fellowship.” More precisely, Paul is saying, “The Cup and the Bread are the *joint participation* of the body and blood of Christ.”

Now the first of the three propositions mentioned above becomes easier to understand. Paul intends his audience to see that the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper announces Christians as members of the Christian religion, as recipients of the one sacrifice of Christ; just as eating the sacrifices of the Altar announced the Old Testament saints as members of Israel and just as eating idol-meats announces pagans as being in fellowship with demons.

In the second proposition, verse 17, it is clarified *why* or *how* Christians have this joint participation: “For we being many are one bread, and one body...” Christians, being many individual members, are nevertheless one corporation or community—they are *one* bread and *one* body. In itself, this second proposition only carries the sense that joint participation in the same Bread binds Christians together into one. It does not necessarily imply anything about *nature* of the Bread or the Cup, *i.e.* whether the Sacrament must be celebrated with literally one bread and literally one cup.

But what of the third proposition, “...for we are all partakers of that one bread”? In other words, Christians are one bread and one body *because* they all partake of one bread. Does this help the Bible student decide whether there is literally one bread and one cup in the celebration of the Sacrament? Unfortunately, there is still some ambiguity. The verse could either mean (A) that “that one bread” is figurative for the Sacrament, and that Paul is only saying, “We’re all one

community because we partake of the same ritual,” or (B) that “that one bread” is literal and so Paul is additionally indicating, “We’re all one community, because when you look at the Sacrament, you’ll notice that the symbol is that the congregation is all eating one bread.”

Given the KJV translation, both interpretations lead to absurdity. If one takes interpretation (A), it is not altogether clear why Paul equates “partaking” of the same bread-ritual with “being” the same bread. The statement that the Church *is* one bread seems completely superfluous to his point, when all he needed to say was that the Church is one body or corporation. However, if one takes interpretation (B), it would seem that Paul is adopting fuzzy language at precisely the point in his argument where he is trying to clear things up. How exactly do Christians *become* one bread by partaking of one bread? What does it even mean to *be* one bread? Neither interpretation has very satisfying answers to the respective questions it raises.

Those questions are relevant to the question of the common cup, because the structure of Paul’s rhetoric indicates that whatever one concludes about the meaning of “one bread” should reflect on the Cup of the Sacrament as well. If interpretation (A) is true, then it is implied that Christians all partake of one cup in the sense of belonging to the same ritual, which is not a particularly interesting theological point. But if interpretation (B) is true, then it is implied that Christians all partake of one cup in the sense of literally drinking from a single large cup when they celebrate the Sacrament, and that packs a theological punch, because most contemporary Reformed and Presbyterian churches practice the Sacrament with multiple individual cups.

But at the *textual* level, restricting the exegesis to *one* English translation, there is an impasse. Both interpretations, (A) and (B) are absurd, and the Bible student has no means of deciding between them. Thus, the question arises, is there an alternative way of translating 1Cor. 10:16-17 that would cause one of the interpretations to make more sense than the other? To answer this question, the reader is referred to the issue of “*Translation*.”

Translation

[16] τὸ ποτήριον τῆς εὐλογίας ὃ εὐλογοῦμεν οὐχὶ κοινωνία τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐστὶν τὸν ἄρτον ὃν κλῶμεν οὐχὶ κοινωνία τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐστὶν [17] ὅτι εἷς ἄρτος ἐν σῶμα οἱ πολλοὶ ἐσμεν οἱ γὰρ πάντες ἐκ τοῦ ἐνὸς ἄρτου μετέχομεν (1Cor. 10:16-17, Byzantine Majority Text)

The resolution to the impasse can be found by combing back over the first phrase of verse 17, which in Greek is *ὅτι εἷς ἄρτος*. But before this can be addressed, the reader should be made aware of at least six things.

First, the reader needs to acknowledge that taking *communion* in verse 16 to mean “community” or “fellowship” is a valid interpretation. The Greek term *κοινωνία*, Strong’s G2842, is often used in this sense in the New Testament, cf. 1Cor. 1:9, 2Cor. 8:4, Eph. 15:3, Philipp. 2:1; and Thayer’s Greek Lexicon actually uses 1Cor. 10:16 as an example of this meaning. Therefore, nothing about the two possible interpretations needs to be revised from this angle.

Second, the reader needs to recognize that the singular noun *ἄρτος* (accusative form: *ἄρτον*), Strong’s G740, may be translated as “bread” in the abstract sense of the substance (or even food in general), *or* it can be translated as “loaf,” *i.e.* a discrete unit of bread. For an example of the second translation of *ἄρτος*, we might examine Mt. 14:19, in which Jesus takes *the five loaves* (*τοὺς πέντε ἄρτους*); or Mk. 6:37, in which the disciples ask Jesus whether they should go and buy *loaves of two hundred denarii* (*διακοσίων δηναρίων ἄρτους*; although the KJV reads as singular “bread,” in the Greek the word is plural). Therefore, it is plausible (and probably more correct, given that Paul says “*one* bread”) to revise the KJV translation of 1Cor. 10:16-17 to read:

[16] The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The *loaf* which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? [17] For we being many are one *loaf*, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one *loaf*.

Third, in *κοινή* Greek there was originally no punctuation. If the reader were to look at the very oldest manuscripts of the New Testament, he would discover no commas, no periods, no question marks or their equivalents, and no semicolons or their equivalents. In fact, there were not even spaces between the words or accent marks, and the document was written in all caps. The point being, in exegeting Biblical passages, the Bible student cannot necessarily form an argument for a particular interpretation based on whether or not a comma or period appears in a certain place in the King James Version or even in the Textus Receptus, because that punctuation mark (or lack thereof) is not part of the inspired original. And when that principle is combined with the next two observations, it introduces an ambiguity about the proper translation of the first few words of 1Cor. 10:17.

Fourth, the word translated “for” at the beginning of verse 17 (*ὅτι*, Strong’s G3754) is not the same word that appears in the second half of the verse (*γὰρ*, Strong’s G1063). The term *γὰρ* always functions as a conjunction that means “for.” But *ὅτι*, on the other hand, is a conjunction that can connect a verb to a subordinate noun clause (e.g., Mt. 2:16, “Then Herod, when he saw *that* he was mocked of the wise men...”) or which can mean “because” (e.g., Mt. 20:15, “Is thine eye evil, *because* I am good?”). This would appear to point away from a translation that would make it appear as though the second half of verse 17 is just a reiteration of the first half. For if Paul wanted to emphasize that he was really just stressing the same point from a different angle, it is more likely that he would have used the *same* word.

Fifth, in *κοινή* Greek there are many instances in which the verb of a sentence or clause is just assumed. At the most basic level, the verb “to be” (*ἐστί*, Strong’s G2076) is often just left out of simple declarative sentences; so that, “This is a loaf,” in Greek would read literally as, “This a loaf.” Concrete example: in the English KJV translation of Rev. 18:8 the voice from heaven declares that Babylon will be judged horribly, “for strong *is* the Lord God who judgeth her.” But in *κοινή*, it reads literally, “Because strong lord the god which judges him” (*ὅτι ἰσχυρὸς κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ κρίνων αὐτήν*). And that brings with it some ambiguity as to where the understood “is” properly belongs. The 1599 Geneva Bible interprets the same verse so that “Lord” is part of the predicate: “for that God which condemneth her, *is* a strong Lord.”

At a more advanced level, the tendency for verbs to be left out means the conjunction *ὅτι* can be combined with nothing more than a simple prepositional phrase, e.g. Rom. 14:23, which literally reads, “The however doubter if he-eats is-damned because not of-faith” (*ὁ δὲ διακρινόμενος ἐὰν φάγη κατακέκριται ὅτι οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως*), by which Paul means that the doubter is not *eating* out of faith. Sometimes *ὅτι* even precedes entire *clauses* being left out, e.g. 2Thess. 2:3, “Let no man deceive you by any means: for *that day shall not come*, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition” (KJV). Literally, that entire verse reads like this in Greek: “No person let-deceive you-all according-to no manner because if not comes the apostasy first and uncovers the man of-the sin, the son of-the destruction” (*μή τις ὑμᾶς ἐξαπατήσει κατὰ μηδένα τρόπον ὅτι ἐὰν μὴ ἔλθῃ ἡ ἀποστασία πρῶτον καὶ ἀποκαλυφθῇ ὁ ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀμαρτίας, ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας*).

Now, if the reader would combine all this information, particularly the last three points that have been made, what must he make of verse 17?

“ὅτι εἷς ἄρτος ἐν σῶμα οἱ πολλοὶ ἐσμεν”

Even *with* spaces between the words, that is the equivalent of saying,

“because one loaf one body the many we-are”

So does one interpret “one body” as an appositive, like this?

“Because we many are one loaf, [*i.e.*] one body.”

Or does one interpret “because one loaf” as a subordinate clause, like this?

“Because [it is] one loaf, we many are one body.”

This is not mere speculation. It is a widely recognized alternative translation that appears in the 1545 *Lutherbibel* in German, the 1602 Reina-Valera *Biblia* in Spanish, the 1637 *Statenvertaling* in Dutch, the 1707 *Martin Bible* in French (which even goes so far as to add the terms “*only one bread*” and “*same bread*” to make sure no one mistook this alternative), and the 2011 English Standard Version and 1995 New American Standard Bible in contemporary English.

But what does that alternative mean? How does it change one’s understanding? Arguably, it places the verse squarely in favor of the interpretation labeled (B)—the idea that although Paul *is* saying that the Sacrament announces who our God is, he is *also* stating something about the nature of the Sacrament itself, namely that it uses one Loaf and one Cup.

If one were to take interpretation (A) and argue that “one bread” should be understood in the abstract sense of communicants all partaking of the same ritual, then verse 17 seems like a somewhat redundant tangent. After all, verse 16 has already made the point that the Sacrament places Christians in the community of Christ’s sacrifice. Of what additional help is it to say that there is one bread, *i.e.* one ritual, so that Christians together are one body? No help. It would be beating a dead horse. Really, it *confuses* things, because under this scheme Paul mentions *body* twice in two sentences but has no intention of linking the two *body*s together.

But if one were to take interpretation (B), then the logic of verses 16 and 17 is simple and straightforward: “The Cup and the Loaf are a joint participation in the body and blood of Christ. Since there is one Loaf *in* the ritual, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one *same* Loaf.” Here, there is a minimum of fuzziness. Each communicant, by taking part of the same Loaf, signifies that he is participating in the same sacrificed body of Christ as all others in the congregation. So then, by implication, each communicant, by drinking from the same cup of wine, signifies that he is participating in the same sacrificed blood of Christ as all others.

This alternative translation of Luther, Reina-Valera, *Statenvertaling*, Martin, the ESV, and the NASB makes clear what the KJV leaves muddied: Interpretation (B) is the more probable sense of 1Cor. 10:17. Paul *is* teaching something about the nature of the Sacrament, namely that

it has one Loaf and one Cup, which have significant meaning in terms of the Supper's function as both sign and seal.

Commentaries

Now a doubt arises. Undeniably, a *plethora* of translators ranging from today back to the very Reformation affirm the alternative translation of 1Cor. 10:16-17. But can it be said that a comparable number of prestigious scholars have concluded in favor of interpretation (B)?

The answer is unequivocally yes. Although the writers of the Geneva Bible (1560), Matthew Poole (1624-1679), Matthew Henry (1662-1716), John Gill (1697-1771), and Jamieson Fausset and Brown (1871) never explicitly come out in favor of the common cup in their respective commentaries on 1Cor. 10:16-17, all of them *do* explicitly come out in favor of a common loaf, which logically leads to the common cup.

Of all the major commentaries, however, John Calvin's (1509-1564) is the most illustrative. The 1573 English translation of Calvin's *Commentarii in priorem epistolam Pauli ad Corinthos* ("Commentaries on the first epistle of Paul to the Corinthians") reads as follows for 1Cor.10:16,

The bread which we break. From this it appears, that it was the custom of the ancient Church to break one loaf, and distribute to every one his own morsel, in order that there might be presented more clearly to the view of all believers their union to the one body of Christ. And that this custom was long kept up appears from the testimony of those who flourished in the three centuries that succeeded the age of the Apostles.

And regarding verse 17, Calvin states,

In this second part of the statement, he [Paul] makes mention only of the one part of the Sacrament, and it is the manner of Scripture to describe by Synecdoche the entire Supper

by *the breaking of bread*. [NOTE: A synecdoche is a part of speech in which one refers to the whole of a thing by one of its parts.] It is necessary to warn my readers, in passing, as to this, lest any less experienced person should be put off his guard by the foolish cavil that is brought forward by certain sycophants — as if Paul, by mentioning merely the bread, had it in view to deprive the people of the one half of the Sacrament.

Although, as with the other commentaries, one finds no explicit statement from Calvin that there is to be one Cup, one does find two propositions that logically combine to give that conclusion: (1) The verses are teaching that there should be one Loaf in the Sacrament. (2) Although the Scripture only speaks to the Loaf, it is very often the case that the Scriptures refer to the whole Sacrament by the part of the Loaf. Hence, Calvin understood 1Cor. 10:16-17 in a way that can leave no doubt of the necessity of the common cup.

The Argument Implied

By now, the passage 1Cor. 10:16-17 has been considered from four angles: (1) Context, (2) Text, (3) Translation, and (4) Commentary. The reader saw from the discussion of “*Context*” that verses 16 and 17 occur within the flow of Paul’s discussion of the witness Christians give by their actions. The reader saw under “*Text*” that, as far as the King James translation goes, it was difficult to resolve the question whether Paul meant verses 16 and 17 to say that the Lord’s Supper only expresses Christians’ external public allegiance to Christ, or whether he was also saying that the Supper by the symbolism intended by God gives Christians real spiritual communion. In “*Translation*” the reader saw that the *Lutherbibel*, the Reina-Valera, the *Statenvertaling*, the Martin, the ESV, and the NASB all offer an alternative reading that sheds more clarity upon the passage. And when this essay considered “*Commentaries*,” the reader saw that all the most renowned Reformed and Presbyterian commentaries support the alternative translation and what it implies: namely, that the Lord’s Supper was intended by God to have a single shared Cup to symbolize the sharing communicants have in the single offered Christ.

The argument implied by what has just been summarized is relatively short. It is this: Given the regulative principle of worship and church-government described in the Belgic Confession Article XXXII and the Westminster Confession Chapter I Section vi—namely the obligation on the part of the Church to depart from any human inventions in worship, to prescribe no more and no less than what is commanded in Scripture, whether explicitly or by good and necessary logical consequence—given this principle, Reformed and Presbyterian churches act contrary to 1 Cor. 10:16-17 when they administer the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper with multiple individual cups. Said churches are in need of reforming their practice according to the Word of God.

Conclusion

In this essay, (1), the verses 1 Cor. 10:16-17 have been carefully exegeted on multiple levels, with consultation from major commentaries; (2), the argument for the common cup that our exegesis implies has been considered; and (3), the reader has seen why the most typical objections to the common cup are inadequate. According to what is taught in 1 Cor. 10:16-17, the Cup of the Lord's Supper should be literally one.

The unity of the Cup is of such great importance because the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper literally joins the communicants to Christ and the Church in the figure of eating one broken Loaf together and imbibing one poured-out Cup together. If the Cup presented to a grouping of Christian believers is not literally one, then it does not visually represent to said communicants their unity to each other in the sacrificed blood of Christ. Although celebrating the Supper with multiple individual cups does not render the Sacrament wholly inefficacious, it greatly mars the biblically prescribed symbolism of the Sacrament; and in light of the judgment threatened in 1Cor. 11 upon those who mar the spirit of the Supper, contemporary conservative Presbyterians and Reformed should pay close attention to reforming their practice. And thus it is my prayer, and the prayer of all those who believe in the common cup, that God would give our churches the grace to see this need for change. Amen.

Objections Answered

Obj. “Come on! The key verse you’re talking about (1Cor. 10:17) doesn’t even mention the Cup! Sure, the unity of the Bread in the form of one Loaf is there; and sure, I’m a good infant baptist and am all for good and necessary consequence, but you’re just inserting what you want to read! Calvin is the only commentator who’s even come close to saying that the Cup is also in view.”

Ans. The Cup is mentioned in both verse 16 and verse 21. There really is no denying that it is also in view.

Obj. “But isn’t this being nitpicky, even Pharisaical? I mean, after all, you had to do tons of exegetical analysis just to get to that conclusion! Shouldn’t we be more concerned about the *big* problems facing the Reformed and Presbyterian churches today, like Federal Vision and Neo-Calvinism? Isn’t it the heart of the believer that really matters, not the outward ritual?”

Ans. One of the Westminster divines, *i.e.* Jeremiah Burroughs, admonishes us in his tract *Gospel-worship* (Sermon I, Obs. ii, pg. 11),

“Such things as seem to be very small and little to us, yet God stands much upon them in the matter of Worship. For there is nothing wherein the Prerogative of God doth more appear than in Worship... Now God stands much upon little things, though men would think it a little matter whether this fire, or that fire, and will not this burn as well as that? But God stands upon it: And so for the Ark, when Uzza did but touch the Ark, when it was ready to fall, we would think it no great matter, but one touch of the Ark cost him his life. There is not any one minnim [small thing] in the Worship of God, but God stands mightily upon it: In the matter of the Sabbath, that's His Worship, for a poor man to gather a few sticks, what great matter is it? But God stands upon it. And so when the men of Beth-Shemesh did but look into the Ark, it cost the lives of fifty thousand

threescore and ten men. If it be a matter of a holy thing that concerns his worship, he would not have it abused in any thing. Let us learn to make conscience of little things in the Worship of God, and not to think, O how nice [nitpicky] such are, and how precise and nice in such small things! Thou doest not understand the nature of Divine worship if so be thou art not nice about it; God is nice and stands upon little things in the matter of his Worship.”

No one is saying that the common cup is the most pressing issue of our day, or that the Sacrament is rendered entirely false and inefficacious if it does not feature a common cup, or that everybody who fails to practice the common cup does so out of willful disobedience to the command of God.

What we are saying is that it is a command of God, and no matter how little it may seem to us, it is worth taking a stand for because it is the command of our Lord. And it is the pattern of history that when theological particulars are entirely forgotten in the commotion of facing “bigger” conflicts, it is very hard to bring them back. We seek only to preserve the historic, scriptural practice of the early Reformed and Presbyterian traditions.

Obj. “You seem incapable of understanding that ‘Cup’ is just a figure of speech that refers not to the vessel itself, but to the Wine in the vessel. The Cup itself doesn’t matter.”

Ans. Is it *possible* “the Cup” in verses 16 and 21 is a figure of speech? Sure. It could be thought of either as a *metonym* [MEH-tuh-nimm] or as a *synecdoche* [sin-NECK-duh-key].

In a *metonym*, a thing or concept is called, not by its own name, but by something associated with that thing or concept. For instance, when I say, “*Westminster* expressed that we should use a common cup,” I do not mean the literal district of Westminster in

London, but the Assembly of Presbyterian and Puritan pastors who met there from 1643 to 1649.

In a *synecdoche*, the word for a particular part of something is used to refer to the thing's whole. For instance, when someone asks you to apply your *John Hancock*, he means for you to make your *signature*. In this case, a part—one specific signature by John Hancock in 1776—has come to refer to the whole—any signature that is, was, or ever will be made.

It is conceded that “the cup” of verses 16 and 21 could be either a metonym for the wine inside the cup or a synecdoche for many cups, but there are good reasons for not thinking so:

First, and perhaps most important, 1Cor. 10:17 clearly implies that the unity of the Cup is symbolic of the unity of Christ's blood, just as the unity of the Loaf is symbolic of the unity of Christ's body. In that case, supposing that “the Cup” is merely a metonym for the Wine, in what other way can the unity of the Wine be represented than presenting it in a single vessel? We can say at a conceptual level to the congregation, “Just think of it as a single unit of wine, even though it is in multiple individual cups,” but does this not undermine the purpose of a Sacrament, as taught in Calvin's *Institute* IV.xiv, that the Sacrament is to be a kind of “visible word” that helps us overcome the weakness of our concepts? And if the unity of the Cup is symbolic of the unity of Christ's blood, a synecdoche is also out of the question for the same reason. How is the unity of Christ's blood illustrated *visually* when the wine is in several individual cups?

Second, the use of one word to represent another word that is closely related to the first, does not exclude the first word. It may be that *Westminster* properly refers to the Assembly of Divines, but that does not mean that the Assembly could still have been “Westminster” if it had met in Edinburgh for its entire duration. *Souls* properly refers to whole persons with flesh and blood, but that does not mean that the sixteen persons Zilpah bore to Jacob could still be “souls” if they, like the golems of Jewish myth, did not

have souls. And similarly, *the cup* may properly refer to the wine inside the cup or even multiple cups, but this does not prove or disprove whether the wine must be contained in a single cup. If we followed such a faulty line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, then not even individual cups would be necessary—we could hold communion with squirt bottles full of wine, or wine contained in gel caps, or wine taken by intinction, and still be in the alleged spirit of the Sacrament. But we use the metonym or synecdoche *the cup* precisely *because* it is associated with the thing it represents, and in this case the metonym or synecdoche was associated with a *single* cup. Thus, we should maintain the unitary Cup that has been associated with a unitary drink.

Therefore, the argument that the singular “Cup” commanded of us is entirely a figure of speech which really means the Wine or multiple cups, is a rather spurious argument.

Obj. “Well, then you know nothing about Jewish tradition. In the Jewish *Mishnah* (משנה), in the *Seder Moed* (סדר מועד, “Order of Festivals”), in the tractate on *Pesachim* (פסחים, “Passovers”), chapter 10, it says that during the Passover feast ‘a person shall not have less than four cups of wine’ (Mishnah 1). The Cup that Jesus used to institute the Sacrament would have been the third cup of the feast, which was commonly known as the Cup of Blessing. We know for a fact from Mishnah 7 of *Pesachim* that the Jewish Cup of Blessing was poured out for each individual. Therefore, we can deduce that Jesus himself must have used multiple individual cups. Case closed.”

Ans. In *Harmonia ex tribus Euangelistis composita, Matthaeo, Marco & Luca: adiuncto seorsum Johanne*, p. 381-2 (English: *Harmony of the Gospels*, Mt. 26:26-30, Mk. 14:22-26, Lk. 22:17-20), published in 1553, John Calvin comments:

“*Jesus took bread*. It is uncertain if the custom which is now observed among the Jews was at that time in use: for the master of the house breaks off a portion of a common loaf, hides it under the table-cloth [i.e., the *afikomen*], and afterwards distributes a part of it to, each member of the family. But as this is a human

tradition not founded on any commandment of God, we need not toil with excessive eagerness to investigate its origin; and it is possible that it may have been afterwards contrived, by a trick of Satan, for the purpose of obscuring the mystery of the Lord's Supper. And even if this ceremony was at that time in use among the Jews, Christ followed the ordinary custom in such a manner as to draw away the minds of his followers to another object, by changing the use of the *bread* for a different purpose.”

It is to be replied, in response to those who would argue for individual cups from the Cup of Blessing, that it remains doubtful whether the oral traditions of the Jews about the *Seder Moed*, which were later written down in the *Mishnah*, had emerged by the time of Christ. The earliest date to which scholars can trace these traditions is shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in *A.D.* 70, but the synoptic gospels and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians are generally regarded as having been written prior to *A.D.* 70.

Moreover, maintaining old Jewish traditions does not seem to be the Christ's agenda in his ministry. Quite the contrary. When the Pharisees and scribes come to Jesus at Gennesaret and ask Jesus why his disciples do not follow the traditions of the elders, Jesus gives a scathing criticism of how these elders negate the word of God through their traditions (Mt. 15:1-20; Mk. 7:1-23). Among the unscriptural traditions scornfully enumerated by Mark is the washing of hands (Mk. 7:3), which (surprise!) is prominent in *Seder Moed*. Even supposing that the traditions of the *Seder Moed* were in common use during the life of Christ, the evidence is that Jesus and his disciples scorned the Jews' man-made traditions and would not have followed them. So if anything, the fact that individual cups were the Jewish tradition is evidence *against* Jesus' use of individual cups. And as Matthew Poole observes from the singing of hymns in Mt. 26:30, if there is any alignment between what Christ did and the later traditions of the Jews, nevertheless we must adhere to the Scriptures alone as the authority over our conscience.

Obj. “Despite your pretensions to follow the regulative principle better than everyone else, you don’t know what you’re talking about. As T. David Gordon (PCA) has pointed out in the context of issues like exclusive psalmody, the regulative principle only applies to questions about the *elements* of worship, *i.e.* deciding which overall pieces of worship are commanded. The details of those pieces are properly labeled *circumstances*, *rubrics*, or *forms*; and the regulative principle does not apply to them. Our Reformed and Presbyterian confessions specify that the ‘Elements’ of the Supper are the Bread and the Wine, so that is all that’s required of us. How many cups we celebrate the Supper with is a question of form, so we can do as we like as far as that’s concerned.”

Ans. T. David Gordon’s scholarship leaves a lot to be desired. I challenge anyone, including Mr. Gordon, to show me where *any* of the Reformed and Presbyterian confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries or *any* of the major theologians of the early Reformed and Presbyterian traditions teach the categories of “rubric” and “form” as alternatives to “elements” of worship. Some of them mention “forms” under their discussions about prayer, but when the stated subject is the regulative principle, *all* of them only acknowledge two categories: (1) commandments of God, and (2) circumstances of worship, a.k.a. ecclesiastical ordinances. Therefore, to argue merely from the fact that the Belgic and Westminster confessions refer to the Bread and Wine as “the Elements” is anachronistic.

The term *Elements* in the great Reformed confessions refers not to categories subject to the regulative principle, but to what goes into the efficacy of the Sacrament. Namely, as the American Presbyterian Charles Hodge teaches in his *Systematic Theology* (III.xx.15, “The elements to be used in the Lord’s Supper”), when it comes to the Lord’s Supper, *Elements* is a term that is defined as the physical, material objects used in the ritual, in distinction from the scriptural Word of institution which the minister speaks over it. This is the same use of the term *Elements* that is taught in the *Institute of the Christian Religion* (IV.xiv.4), where John Calvin refers to the Element of a Sacrament as the “external sign,” in contrast to “the Word” which consecrates it. In that same chapter and section of the *Institute*, Calvin quotes St. Augustine’s *Tractatus in evangelium Iohannis*

(LXXX.iii), in which the Bishop of Hippo said, “*Accedit verbum ad elementum et fit sacramentum*” (“The word comes to the element, and it is made a sacrament.”) By that statement, Augustine meant that the physical matter (Element) of water was consecrated for the Sacrament of Baptism by the minister reading the relevant Scriptures. As we can see, *Element* in this discussion does not mean “that part only which is required of worship,” but “that part of a Sacrament which being physical becomes efficacious by the word of institution.”

Obj. “Okay, so what do you do when the Wine runs out of your one Cup?”

Well, understand what is actually being argued. Not everybody is saying in this discussion that *one Cup* has to be *strictly* one Cup. True, some of us who believe in the common cup *might* say that, and so their solution would be to simply refill the Cup as they went along, which presents absolutely no problem whatsoever because the Element consecrated is the Wine, which is usually at the Table in a pitcher. Personally, I the author of this essay believe that it is entirely within the bounds of the regulative principle, and I actually lean toward it because the Wine is actually “poured out,” as is probably implied in Christ’s words of institution.

But a slightly different solution was prescribed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines. Their *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645) states,

“After this exhortation, warning, and invitation, the table being before decently covered, and so conveniently placed, that the communicants may orderly sit about it, or at it, the minister is to begin the action with sanctifying and blessing the elements of bread and wine set before him, (the bread in comely and convenient vessels, so prepared, that, being broken by him, and given, it may be distributed amongst the communicants; the wine also in large cups,) having first, in a few words, shewed that those elements, otherwise common, are now set apart and sanctified to this holy use, by the word of institution and prayer.”

Now, note that these are *large* cups, so nobody can use this paragraph to justify multiple individual cups from the example of Westminster. But under this scheme, the Wine is in several large cups when it is consecrated, and each “Cup” is simply replaced with another as the communicants are called forward to the Table in successive installments. In Scottish Presbyterian sacramentology, each of these “installments” is considered a discrete administration of the Sacrament given to a discrete congregation of believers. So although, yes, the minister consecrates multiple cups, only one cup is presented per administration. (Note: The English Independents of the Westminster Assembly objected to the idea of multiple installments, but this originated not from a rejection of the common cup, but from a rejection of presbyterian church-government.)

These two solutions show that supplying large numbers with sufficient Wine does not present a problem to a common cup.

Obj. “Okay, okay. I can accept that 1Cor. 10:16-17 most likely is teaching the use of the common cup, but come on! Drinking from the same cup as somebody else is gross!”

Ans. I should be level with you, the reader. I like animals. A lot. I once wanted to be a veterinarian, but I quit myself of that aspiration the first time I, as a volunteer at a local clinic, witnessed worms being extracted from a dog’s colon. I do not like to see animals die, or even suffer. There was this one time my dad shot an armadillo we caught burrowing under our house, and as the poor guy was twitching in his death throes, I begged dad to give him mercy with a cap in the skull. Dad obliged. Even then, as I watched the blood trickle out through the armadillo’s shattered brains, I was filled with horror for the creature, who had no knowledge when he had begun to dig that night what would be the consequences for doing so. It filled me with even more horror when, as a graduate student in Behavior Analysis, I had to euthanize my Sprague-Dawley rats by asphyxiation once I was done using them for my thesis experiment. I had to watch them gasp for oxygen only to have their little lungs filled with poisonous carbon dioxide.

What does that have to do with anything? Well, in the Old Testament God commanded the sacrifice of animals. And if you will be so diligent as to read Leviticus, that process involved bleeding the animals out and carving out their still-warm entrails. What do you think God's response to me would be if I were an Israelite who stood with the twelve tribes before Mount Sinai and I informed God that I refused to participate in the Tabernacle sacrifices because I thought they were "gross"? The question is not impertinent, given Paul's comparison of the Lord's Supper to the Temple sacrifices in 1Cor. 10.

What do you think if I, in the place of Ezekiel, had informed God that I would not cook my bread over human dung because I considered it unsanitary (cf. Ezek. 4:12)?

Now, I have read many cogent arguments that the alcohol in the wine of communion is sufficient to sanitize the cup with every drink. Conservative Lutherans argue that the gold from their chalices, being a noble metal, somehow provides an extra source of sanitation. I am not a biologist or a medical doctor, so that I could say one way or the other whether these arguments are valid. Nor do I have the background necessary to explore the medical literature.

But the bottom line is, God commanded it, He is my Lord, I am expected to do it without backtalk. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commandments and *keeps* them, *he* it is who loves me" (Jn. 14:21, emphasis mine). I understand and sympathize with people who experience revulsion and need time, in their weakness, to get over it. I think God is merciful in cases of sincere but failed obedience, as He was under the reign of Hezekiah (2Chr. 30:18-20). But those who point-blank refuse to even try to get over their revulsion need to examine their hearts: "Should I not rather be thankful that I am not being asked to kill and gut animals? Should I not rather be thankful that I am not being asked to cook bread over human waste? Should I not remember that 'as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than my ways, and His thoughts than my thoughts' (Is.

55:9), and should I question the wisdom of His commandment? Can I not just *try* to obey?”

Obj. “Okay, I’m over the gross factor. But honestly, what if I have a seriously contagious illness? I don’t want to give it to anybody else.”

Ans. Volunteer to drink last, or just *pretend* to drink and pray that God would wink at the slight breach of detail that was individual to you and which was necessary upon this occasion to safeguard the health of your brothers and sisters. Better by far to bend the rule once as the occasion requires than to bend the rule permanently by always having multiple individual cups.

Obj. “But what about that one guy in our congregation who used to be Fundamental Baptist and still has conscience issues about imbibing alcohol?”

Ans. If you have that person in your congregation, he is always free to take the Supper somewhere else, because we are not Congregationalists, but Reformed and Presbyterian. We believe that the Visible Church is catholic or universal, so that *wherever* two or three are gathered together in Christ’s name, there is an individual congregation of the Visible Church with which this man may partake of the Supper.

If you have such a person in a relatively large congregation, I personally see no problem with offering one separate administration of the Supper with grape juice on a temporary basis while the Pastor and Session meet with him to help him work through these issues of conscience. I say “temporarily” because we do not want to encourage any changes in the official policy of the Church.

But the bottom line is, no Session should force the Christian to disobey his conscience toward God unless it be concerned with a very serious sin; and so in these cases, Sessions

should either allow the conscientious objector to attend another true church's administration of the Supper or temporarily accommodate the objector in the Session's own administrations.

About the Author

As of this writing, Bobby Phillips is a communicant member of the Atlanta, GA, congregation of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), and is a resident of northern Alabama. Part of why he is willing to make the 3.5-hr commute to Free Church Atlanta once a fortnight is because of the rich intimacy of its common-cup Supper. He works as a classroom therapist and behavioral consultant at a small non-profit school for children with autism-spectrum disorders. His hobbies include studying historical theology; studying Imperial German history; daily practicing *κοινή* Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Classical Latin, and High German and dabbling in Standard Dutch, Standard French, and *Castellano* Spanish.