

The “One Cup” Doctrine

Intro: A recent paid ad in the Tennessean appeared called “Brookside church of Christ laments changes in the Lord’s Supper”. The article states that the congregation “feels obligated to continue to worship, as did the earliest Christians, with acappella music, one common assembly for the teaching, observing the Lord’s Supper every Lord’s day with one cup and one loaf on the Lord’s table”.

The quotation identifies two peculiar doctrines associated with brethren of this fellowship:

1. the only authorized arrangement for teaching the Scriptures is in the assembly of all Christians and that the church may not provide classes for instruction where women teach
2. The fruit of the vine must be served from one container in order to properly observe the Lord’s Supper

These positions have been debated among brethren for nearly a century. Yet new generations arise without any knowledge of these positions or what the Bible teaches about them. So I want to address again the issue of one container in the Lord’s Supper.

Affirmations of the “One Cup” Position

Jesus and his disciples drank from one container at the Passover.

The early church drank the fruit of the vine from one container and multiple containers were not used until the late 19th century (used in churches of Christ after 1915).

The one container symbolizes the “new covenant” of Christ (a third element in the Lord’s Supper).

To use multiple containers is to disobey the command of the Lord, “this do”. I respect and appreciate the efforts these brethren make to strictly follow the NT teaching on the Lord’s Supper; but I believe that they are in error in binding “one container” as a part of the Lord’s institution and in fact do the very thing they oppose, viz., “add to” the word of God.

Errors of the “one Cup” position

Both historical and Biblical evidence suggest that multiple cups were used in the institution of the Lord’s Supper.

The descriptions of the Passover from Jewish texts such as the Mishnah indicate a plurality of cups in the Passover meal. Four large cups of wine were placed on the table, according to Talmudic tradition, to be drunk symbolically by each of the participants. Each participant possessed his own drinking vessel (as you might expect at a dinner) into which the four symbolic cups were poured out and from which he drank during the feast.

The evidence from Scripture itself shows that Jesus was following the same Seder custom.

And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; (Luke 22:17)

The Greek term for "share" means to "divide" or "distribute".

And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. "But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:26-29)

Both Matthew and Mark record the additional command "drink from it all of you". (Greek "ek" meaning "out of")

Note that the command to "drink" follows the command to "divide". Thus, when Jesus told the disciples to drink "from it" referring to the cup, his language did not demand that the disciples all put their lips to a single container.

"You are not greater than our father Jacob, are You, who gave us the well, and drank of it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?" (John 4:12)

Quotes from the early church indicate a plural number of containers. An early liturgy of the Lord's Supper has this prayer: "We pray and beseech Thee, O Lord, in thy mercy, to let thy presence rest upon this bread and these chalices on the all-holy table". (Liturgy) Even if we do not agree with the concept of a formulaic or liturgical service, we can see the presence of multiple containers and refutation of the claim that multiple containers were not used before 1894. What was invented in 1894 was a tray that would hold multiple containers.

The "cup" referred to in the Lord's Supper passages is the contents, the fruit of the vine, and is not the container. It is the thing drunk, not the thing drunk from!

In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. (1 Corinthians 11:25-28)

Clearly the word "cup" by metonymy stands for the "contents", the fruit of the vine, rather than the container.

If I say, I bought a 2 liter of Pepsi and drank the whole bottle, I am using metonymy. I did not drink the container, but the contents.

If I go to Morrison's and say, "I went to Morrison's, ordered the blue plate special and ate the whole plate". I don't mean I ate the glassware but the food that was on the plate.

No significance is given the container in the NT; spiritual significance is give to the substance in the container. The substance is referenced by the word "cup".

The "one cup" position makes the container a third element in the Lord's supper, a symbol of the new covenant in addition to the body and blood of Jesus.

Conclusion: The attempt to strictly follow the Scripture is admirable; but to bind where God has not bound results in an alteration of the institutions God has given, placing emphasis on what God has not emphasized.