

Do The Scriptures Authorize Multiple Cups?

BY PAUL MELTON

Wayne Jackson, a preacher of the church of Christ, is well known for his scholarly explanations of many biblical issues. On the *Christian Courier* website, Wayne Jackson wrote an article in response to the following question:

“Why do so many churches use a plurality of ‘cups’ in administering the Lord’s supper, when the Scriptures appear to authorize just one, ‘a cup’?”

After considering his response to this question, we have found it to be in variance to the New Testament teaching on this subject. He defends the use of a plurality of drinking vessels in the Lord’s supper by asserting that the word “cup” always refers to the liquid within the cup, and not to the cup itself.

He states: “When the New Testament speaks of the ‘cup,’ in observing the communion, it is not the literal container that is under consideration; rather, it is the contents, i.e., the fruit of the vine that is in view.” Then he offers four proofs of this assertion, which we would like to examine under the light of the Sacred Scriptures.

Metonymy

(1) In support of this assertion, the claim is made that “metonymy is being used in EVERY place that the ‘cup’ is referred to” (*Patrick T. Donahue “One Container?”*). Metonymy literally means a “change in name”. It is “a figure of speech by which one name or noun is used instead of another, to which it stands in a certain relation” (*E.W. Bullinger, Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, Baker Book House, 1981 edition, p.538*).

One type of metonymy is when the container is put for its contents. For example, metonymy is used in Deuteronomy 28:5 where the word “basket” is used to refer to its contents. Consider also Hebrews 11:7, where “Noah prepared an ark to the saving of his house.” The house (container) stands for the people it contains, namely Noah’s family which inhabited it. In the same way, in John 3:16 “world” does not refer to the material globe but to its inhabitants which are divinely loved. In the same way, the contention is made that EVERY instance in the New Testament where the word “cup” is used with reference to the Lord’s Supper, “cup” does not refer to the container, but exclusively to its contents, the fruit of the vine. That such a blanket assertion is flawed is evident from the following facts:

FACT – The Greek word *poterion* used in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul’s account of the Lord’s supper commonly translated “cup” in our Bibles **is defined by Thayer, Robinson, and Young in their Greek lexicons as a “drinking vessel.”** Other Greek scholars translate it as:

“a wine cup” (Abbott-Smith and Liddell and Scott),

“a goblet” (Pickering and Schrevelius),

“a vessel for drinking” (Bagster).

The cup is a drinking vessel made of gold, silver, glass, wood, etc. To my knowledge, all reputable Greek lexicons define the word 'cup' in Matthew 26:26 and Mark 14:23 as a drinking vessel (not a liquid).

Wayne Jackson contradicts the world's most highly-respected Greek scholars by saying: "That **the 'cup' is not the container** is even more vividly depicted in Luke's record." All the above Greek experts and lexicons state clearly that **the cup is the container!**

FACT – The word "cup" must be taken literally whenever possible.

E.W. Bullinger (an authority on biblical figures) writes:

"When and wherever it is possible, the words of Scripture are to be understood literally." Otherwise, he says, "we may reasonably expect that some figure is employed." Then he states, "It is not open to anyone to say of this or that word or sentence, 'This is a figure,' according to his own fancy or to suit his purpose. We are dealing with a science whose laws and workings are known."

Those who say "the communion cup is **always** used in a figurative sense" are required to prove that it is impossible to take the word "cup" literally in any of the Lord-supper passages.

Matthew 26:27 reads: "**He took the cup**, and gave thanks and **gave it to them**, saying, '**Drink from it**, all of you.'" Is it possible for a man to take a literal cup (container) in his hands? If it is possible, then we are forbidden by the rules of logic to take it figuratively. Is it possible for a man to give a literal cup (drinking vessel) to another person or group of people? It is possible. Would it have been possible for all of the disciples to drink from the same literal container (cup)? Yes. Therefore, no one has the right to say the word "cup" figuratively refers exclusively to its contents in this passage.

Capriciously assigning figurative meanings to words where the context does not require such meanings is to "torture" the Holy Scriptures (2 Peter 3:16). Therefore, we must take the word "cup" literally whenever possible. The renowned Greek scholar Robertson in Matthew 26:27 said, "In Matt.26:27, *poteerion* means a literal cup, while *touto* (this) (in verse 28) refers to the contents." Thayer in his Greek Lexicon concurs with Robertson, defining the word "cup" in Mt. 26:27; Mk.14:23; Lk.22:17 as "the vessel out of which one drinks."

FACT – Cup is sometimes used figuratively to refer to its contents.

The common expression "drink this cup" is understood by all to refer to drinking the contents of the cup since it is obviously not possible to drink a literal container. It is not possible to drink a solid. Even if a cup composed of meltable material were liquefied, we could not drink the literal cup because after liquefaction it would no longer be a cup. The only way to "drink a cup" is by drinking the liquid it contains. For this reason, no one can deny that the phrase "drink this cup" in 1 Cor.11:26 is used by metonymy to refer to the contents of the cup.

FACT – For the word “cup” to refer to “grape juice” by metonymy, the grape juice must be in a literal cup!

For example, if you have a kettle full of water, and you say “the kettle is boiling,” you are using metonymy by referring to the kettle when you are actually suggesting its contents, the water in it. The kettle is not the water, nor does it become the water (Metonymy is not synonymy. Kettle and water are not synonymous). As a matter of fact, the only way a kettle can ever refer to water is if the water is in a kettle!

Jesus had a “cup” full of grape juice and said “drink” this cup. In this passage, He was using metonymy by referring to the cup when he was actually suggesting its contents, the grape juice in it. The cup was not the grape juice, nor did the cup become the grape juice (Metonymy is not synonymy. Cup and fruit of the vine are not synonymous). As a matter of fact, the only way a cup can ever refer to fruit of the vine is if the fruit of the vine is in a cup!

If grape juice is not in a cup, you cannot accurately call it a cup. For instance, if grape juice is in a bottle, you cannot call it “the cup.” You cannot drink “this cup” by drinking grape juice from multiple cups; you would be drinking “these cups.” The only way to “drink this cup” (which contained grape juice) would be to drink grape juice from a single cup!

Divide the Cup

(2) Luke 22:17 states, “*Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves...."*

Wayne Jackson states: “Were the disciples to divide a container? Of course not. They were to divide the fruit of the vine, which incidentally, most likely was facilitated by multiple containers.”

Then he quotes Frederic Godet: “The distribution (*diamerisate*) may have taken place in two ways, either by each drinking from the common cup, or by their all emptying the wine of that cup into their own...” (*A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1879, Vol. II, p. 289). These are the two ways in which the cup could have been divided. Are we just left to our opinion as to how the disciples divided the cup among themselves? No, the Bible tells us precisely how they divided the cup in Mark 14:23 “*Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, and they all drank of it.*”

The word "**OF**" here in Mark 14:23 in the Greek is "*pino ek*." Thayer's Greek dictionary defines this Greek word translated "of" (*pino ek*) like this: "a genitive of the vessel out of which one drinks." They drank out of the cup. According to the Greek lexicographer Thayer, the only thing you can drink OUT OF is a literal vessel. It is impossible to drink OUT OF the fruit of the vine, because the fruit of the vine is not a vessel! By using the words "*pino ek*" (out of) as the preposition before the word "cup" in Mark 14:23, the writers of the Scriptures unmistakably made clear that Jesus and his disciples drank OUT OF a literal cup. It is true that Matthew 26:29 says that we drink "OF" the fruit of the vine. However the word “OF” in Matthew 26:29 is simply "*ek*" in the Greek, whereas the word in Mark 14:23 is "*pino ek*" which means drink OUT OF. We can drink OF ("*ek*") the fruit of the vine, but the only thing we can drink OUT OF ("*pino ek*") is a cup or some other vessel.

Though there may be a thousand unconventional ways to drink from a cup, the standard method of drinking from a cup is and always has been to pick up the cup, put it to one's lips and drink. "In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we must conclude that the standard method was used by Jesus and his disciples" (*Individual Cups, Notes Compiled by George Battey*). The disciples obviously divided the cup among themselves by all drinking from it in the conventional way.

The Cup which "We" Bless

(3) To prove that only the liquid is envisioned by the use of the word "cup," some appeal to 1 Corinthians 10:16 which states "*The cup [singular] which we [plural] bless.*"

Wayne Jackson writes, "It is obvious that "cup" cannot refer to a container, as evidenced by the fact that Paul in Ephesus, and his brethren at Corinth, were sharing (note the "we") the same "cup," i.e., a common substance (fruit of the vine), which reflects a spiritual idea, namely the blood of Christ, not a common container."

This reasoning is fallacious. First, the "we" refers to "*we the assembled*" (Alford's Greek Lexicon). This is necessarily implied because we partake of the Lord's supper as the local body of Christ, not as the universal body. Our blessing of the cup and breaking of the loaf mentioned in 1 Corinthians 10:16 are acts which we perform when we are gathered together as a local congregation. For example we do not pronounce one universal blessing each Sunday for the cup. Each congregation has a cup and "blesses" that cup. It would be foolish to claim that the Lord's supper can be observed on a "super-congregational level." The Lord's supper can only be observed on a congregational level and the inspired statements made regarding the Lord's supper must be interpreted in that context.

Alfred Newberry in His book entitled *The Divine Pattern Advocate* comments: "Paul frequently used the word 'we' because, as he explained, 'For though I be absent in the flesh, Yet am I with you in the spirit' (Col 2:5). For example, in 1 Thess. 4:17 he wrote, 'Then **we** which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air...' If Paul's usage of the pronoun 'we' carries special significance, then here it means he is still alive and will be alive when Christ returns. The 'over interpretation' (attaching meaning where there is none) of Paul's usage of 'we' in either 1 Cor. 10:17 or 1 Thess. 4:17 leads to false doctrine."

Obviously, "we" in 1 Corinthians 10:16,17 refers to "we the assembled," since we break the communion bread and bless the cup of the Lord nowhere but in the assembly. Therefore, there is no reason whatsoever to take the word "cup" in 1 Corinthians 10:16 in a figurative way. In each congregation, we the assembled bless a cup containing fruit of the vine and break a loaf in memory of Jesus.

The Table of the Lord

(4) To validate the use of multiple cups, Wayne Jackson states, "Just as Paul uses 'cup' figuratively so also does he employ the term 'table' symbolically (1 Cor.10:21)." First, the term 'table' carries with it no spiritual symbolism. Obviously to partake of the Lord's table means to partake of what is on the Lord's table.

“A literal table is necessary because whatever is necessary to obeying a command is not an incidental, but an essential item....It is essential to set the loaf and cup down on something in order to observe the communion the way the Lord directed....By way of statement (1 Corinthians 10:21), the table was made essential” (*Individual Cups, Notes Compiled by George Battey*).

The Cup, a Symbol of the New Covenant

Unlike the “table of the Lord” (which is necessary but without spiritual symbolism), the literal cup containing grape juice is both necessary and possessing a rich symbolism. Jesus said in 1 Corinthians 11:25, “**This cup is the new covenant in My blood.**” The cup (*poteerion*) containing grape juice is a token of the New Covenant ratified by the blood of Jesus. In this verse, the word “in” is used in the instrumental case, not the locative case. “In my blood” does not show the location of the new covenant, but the instrument by which the covenant was ratified.

Consider the following translations of this verse:

Moffatt - “This cup means the new covenant ratified by my blood.”

Williams - “This cup is the new covenant ratified by my blood.”

Twentieth Century N.T. - “This cup is the new covenant made by my blood.”

Goodspeed - “This cup is the new agreement ratified by my blood.”

“This” Is My Blood

Does Mark 14:24 teach that the cup is the blood? Mark 14:24 states: “*And He said to them, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.”*” The expression “blood of the covenant” in this verse is borrowed from Exodus 24:6-8 where the Old Covenant was ratified by the sprinkling of sacrificial blood. In the same way, the blood of Jesus ratified the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:12, 18-20).

Consider the following translations of Mark 14:24:

Goodspeed - “This is my blood which ratifies the agreement.”

Williams - “This is my blood which ratifies the covenant”

Some contend that the antecedent of “this” is the term “cup” found in verse 23, and therefore conclude that “This cup is my blood of the new covenant.” However can the word “this” refer to anything besides “cup”? Yes. “This” can grammatically refer to the fruit of the vine contained in the cup by “indirect pronoun reference.”

Another example of an indirect pronoun reference would be the word “this” used in Matthew 9:28 where Jesus asked, “Do you believe that I am able to do **this**?” “This” refers to the understood ability of Jesus to heal blind men.

In the same way, when we read “This is my blood” in Matthew 26:28 it is understood that “this” [fruit of the vine] symbolizes “my blood.” “This” therefore refers to all that he had taken in His hands, the fruit of the vine contained in a literal cup. This fact is even more evident when you consider the next verse (verse 29) where He states, “I will not drink of **this** fruit of the vine from

now on until....” He says, “This is my blood”...then He says “I will not drink of this fruit of the vine...” The connection between the fruit of the vine and the blood is unmistakable.

In summary, the following three statements made by the inspired writers are contextual, analogical, syntactical and grammatical parallels in their essential particulars:

“This [bread] is my body which is given for you” (Luke 22:19).

“This [fruit of the vine] is my blood of the New Testament (Mk. 14:24)

“This cup is the New Testament in my blood” (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor.11:25).

As you can see, the cup represents one thing and the fruit of the vine represents another, yet their relationship to one another is rich in symbolism.

“The similarities between a cup and the New Testament are not in how the cup looks, but in how it functions. (1) Just as a liquid is incomplete without a container, so the blood of Christ is incomplete without the New Testament. (2) The purpose of the cup is to distribute its contents to people just like the New Covenant distributes the blessings of Christ’s blood to people. (3) By all sharing the same cup together during communion, a picture is seen of one covenant distributing the same blessings to all members of the church” (*Individual Cups, Notes Compiled by George Battey*).

To conclude that the fruit of the vine represents both the New Covenant and the blood of Christ is to destroy the brilliant portrayal of the relationship between the covenant and the blood, illustrated by the cup and the fruit of the vine.

Large Crowds and Disease Control

Wayne Jackson says that the use of multiple containers “*facilitates the larger crowds of today’s church. It certainly facilitates disease control.*”

First, there is no evidence whatsoever that using a common cup in the Lord’s supper is unsanitary or that it would in any way result in the spread of disease. Many comprehensive and unbiased scientific experiments have been performed proving that the possibility of contagion through drinking from a common cup is virtually non-existent.

Secondly, when a congregation becomes so large that it can no longer drink out of a single communion cup, the scriptural thing to do is form two separate and distinct congregations meeting in different places (yet holding to the same doctrine), not introduce two or more cups.

Some assume that the congregation in Jerusalem with about three thousand members was too large for a common cup. However, this presupposes that all the members converted in Jerusalem met in one massive assembly to partake of the Lord’s supper. This also assumes that there was only one congregation in the vicinity of Jerusalem. However, there were at least five cities within walking distance of Jerusalem: Emmaus, Bethany, Bethpage, Bethlehem, and Jericho, where congregations may have existed. It seems probable and almost certain that these converts on the Day of Pentecost attended different congregation in Jerusalem and its surrounding areas to partake of the Lord’s supper as Jesus commanded with one cup and one loaf.

Creating Division

Wayne Jackson concludes his article by stating: “*To create division within the body of Christ over the issue of how many containers are used in the distribution of the fruit of the vine is, therefore, an error of serious import.*”

Who created the division? Prior to the awareness of the microbe in the late 1800s the common practice in the church of Christ and even in the denominations was the use of one cup.

In the June 25, 1904 issue of the Christian Standard, J.W. McGarvey referred to “*the fresh and verdant fad of the individual communion cups, which is all the rage now with the church members who care more for ‘keeping up the procession’ than for the following the example of our Lord.*”

Congregations all over the country which had always shared from a common cup were split by brethren forcing the novel idea of using of individual cups upon the congregations.

Conclusion — The number of containers used in the observing of the Lord's supper is not an "optional expediency which may be employed at the discretion of the worshippers." Jesus established the number of cups to be used by the church very clearly in the pages of the New Testament. It behooves us to follow his instructions.