

## Covid Communion?

*This note carries advice or recommendations. The document is subject to change as our response to COVID-19 develops.*

### Version History

Version	Date	Summary of Changes
V.1	02/07/20	First version of document

One element of church life that has been suspended during the present Covid-19 crisis, is communion. Some people are asking whether it is legitimate to have communion “online”. “Virtual Communion” presumably means each participant using their own bread and wine, and, at the appropriate point during the service, as directed by the minister, the elements would be eaten and drunk at home.

Prof. Donald Macleod, writing in opposition to this, makes the following points<sup>1</sup>:

1. The most obvious feature of the Last Supper is that it was a shared meal; and those who shared it were not present only ‘in spirit,’ far less only virtually. They were present physically, and thus able to share together the bread which had been broken and over which the blessing had been said; and in the same way to share in the wine which had been poured out. To them the Lord said, face to face, ‘Take, eat,’ and, ‘All of you drink it.’
2. The bread and the wine are ‘given and received,’ and it is not just any bread and wine: it is this bread and this cup (1 Cor. 11.26), for which thanks have been given, and over which the words of explanation and institution have been pronounced. It is precisely as this bread and this cup, and only as this bread and this cup, that the elements represent the broken body of Christ and the blood of the new covenant. No such giving and receiving is possible in a merely virtual Service.
3. The Lord’s Supper, by nature is communion. In 1 Corinthians 10.16-17 Paul describes the ‘cup of blessing as a sharing in the blood of Christ and the breaking of the bread as a sharing in his body. The Greek word in both instances is *koinōnia*, conveying the basic idea of having something in common. In the Lord’s Supper, we share or have in common the same bread and the same wine, reflecting the fact that what binds us together is the one body and the one blood of Christ. This is consistent with the use of several chalices or even individual cups in a congregational setting; it is not consistent with a virtual service.

Hence, because the Lord’s Supper is a tangible and collective occasion, it must include the giving and receiving of the elements as we corporately remember the Lord’s death. We believe that these important and basic prerequisites are absent when we try to observe the Lord’s Supper virtually.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.donaldmacleod.org.uk/dm/online-communion-services/>

In these unusual circumstances, we believe that the best option is to wait for better times, and, when we are able to have communion again, we will perhaps treasure it with all the more thankfulness.

### **Communion after the Lockdown?**

A second common question is, "What will communion look like after the lockdown?" This question firstly amounts to whether we should use the common cup, knowing as we do, the risks of passing on infection. Similarly, should we pass a plate of bread, and run the risk of contaminating either the plate or the other pieces of bread, thus endangering the next person or persons?

**Is the common cup necessary?** The answer will depend on what is regarded as necessary. There is no doubt that Jesus and his disciples used a common cup at the Last Supper<sup>2</sup>. It is also clear that the communion "in one body"<sup>3</sup> which Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 10 is represented by a single common cup.<sup>4</sup>

But is the common cup so necessary that, without it, communion is not communion? This is where past theologians can help us. At the Westminster Assembly there was a heated debate, not about the common cup, but about whether to sit round a table. Two Scots ministers, Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie, insisted upon sitting at a real table in order to preserve the familial environment in which the Lord's Supper was dispensed originally among the disciples.

But, when challenged by his English brethren about this view, Rutherford admitted that, on a basic level, a table wasn't actually of "sacramental necessity". He then famously remarked that if you lived in a cave you could still have communion even without cups.<sup>5</sup> While Rutherford believed that a table was appropriate in order to create an important context for communion, he nonetheless conceded that the table was not of "sacramental necessity", meaning that a table was not an essential element in the basic act of remembrance.

It is helpful to think of these two levels of necessity. The foundational elements (bread and wine), which symbolise the body and blood of Jesus, are of *sacramental necessity*; communion is not communion without them. But, in addition to these, there are other wider symbolisms, like the common cup, alcoholic wine, and a real table which, while significant, may not be absolutely essential to make communion legitimate.

In the present pandemic, the harsh reality is that, as the common cup is handled by, and touched by the lips of perhaps dozens of people, there is a high risk of infection being passed from one person to another. So, while the common cup may be desirable in an ideal world, we must take cognisance of the real danger of passing infection, and act accordingly, whilst at the same time, observing, in so far as we can, the command to remember the Lord's death in communion.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:27

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:16-22

<sup>4</sup> To be consistent, and to preserve the same corporate symbolism, we'd also have to eat from the same loaf, meaning that we'd have to pass a single loaf from one person to another, and in turn, break pieces off to eat. The practice (which is now common in Free Church congregations) of having individual, pre-cut, pieces of bread, actually breaks this symbolism in the same manner as individual cups.

<sup>5</sup> Van Dixhoorn, Chad. *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, Vol III, p.171.

<sup>6</sup> It is sometimes suggested that, if alcoholic wine is used, particularly in a silver cup, infection is eliminated. This is incorrect. Covid-19 is a highly infectious virus. The alcohol content, even in stronger port wine, is not enough to prevent contagion.

Our conclusion then is that, when it is safe to have it again, congregations should ensure that communion is dispensed as hygienically as possible, with the use of individual cups and pre-cut pieces of bread, served as single units, avoiding the danger of cross contamination.<sup>7</sup>

But there is a further problem. It is **impossible** for one person to hand a plate or cup to another from a distance of 2m. This applies to one person sitting in a seat OR an elder trying to pass a plate or cup to another person. It simply can't be done from 2m. (Try passing anything to another person from a 2m distance!)

The only possible communion liturgy at present, is that communicants come out of their seats to a table at the front (and/or rear), pick up individually prepared elements (single cups and single pieces of bread), and take them back to their seats for consumption.

## **Conclusion**

Kirk Sessions need to be aware that as they sanction the observance of the Lord's Supper, they have a duty of care to those who sit in the pews for Communion services, and hence need to think things through carefully. The Biblical principles which protect human life ought to be uppermost in our thinking.

Some of our members have medical conditions which we are not aware of. The death rate among persons who are in "at risk" groups has been higher than the average person in the population. Whereas for an average healthy person Covid-19 may be a mild illness, it could be a death sentence for someone in an "at risk" group.

During phase 3 (and probably beyond), if churches choose to remember the Lord's death in communion, they will have to make adjustments in order to ensure the safety and health of believers. Hygienic preparation<sup>8</sup>, the use of individual cups and bread pieces, served as single units, and a careful liturgy in which communicants leave their seats to collect the elements, will provide some of the necessary safeguards in which participants can commemorate Calvary with peace of mind.

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<sup>7</sup> The officiating minister would have to use hand gel before touching the bread and the one symbolic wine goblet.

<sup>8</sup> Things to be considered would be the cleaning of surfaces such as table tops, hand cleaning and the use of gloves and masks by those preparing the bread and the wine.