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SWINE FLU AND THE COMMON CUP

By David Phillips

Most readers will know that in June, acting on government advice regarding Swine Flue, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York advised that churches should no longer share the common cup during communion services. They advise against intinction (dipping a piece of bread into the wine), suggest that clergy should still receive the wine and state that the use of individual cups 'is not lawful' in the Church of England.

Aside from the impact on the sellers of communion wine there appear to have been a number of responses to this and questions have been raised about the wisdom and correctness of the advice given.

It must be said that the Archbishops are in a difficult position. There has been a degree of media paranoia about Swine Flu and at an earlier stage some journalists were even suggesting that people should be banned from meeting in churches. Furthermore, in our present litigious and blame centred culture people will always look for someone else to castigate for their failings and preferably someone they can squeeze for money at the same time. If the Government and Archbishops had said nothing it is not hard to imagine some of the comment and claims that might have followed.

Authority

The first objection is that the Government and Archbishops did not have the authority to say what they said. Alan Bartley had both a letter and article published in the Church press calling attention to this. The Archbishops appealed to Sacrament Act 1547 which requires the bread and wine to be given 'except necessity otherwise require'. The Archbishops argued, on advice, that 'necessity' includes times of plague. Bartley, citing old sources, argues that the phrase has been misrepresented and only applies '*to young children and dying persons, who might receive the cup alone when unable to swallow the bread*'. If he is correct then the Archbishops did not have the legal authority to issue the advice they did. The Book of Common Prayer rubrics (see below) suggest that Bartley is right in this. He also rightly asks:

"is the rite of the shared cup simply the command of a man of his time who might have done differently had he known of all its inherent dangers? Or did the Tri-une God, plan and institute the Lord's Supper knowing that for twenty centuries it would facilitate the spread of death and disease because we did not know to suspend it during times of plague and pandemic? Plagues and pandemics that we believe to be a part of God's Providence as part of His chastisement of our fallen race."

Health risks?

Alongside the last point above many are asking why it is that we think the common cup presents a special health risk? Those of us who are clergy regularly drain the cup after the congregation have drunk. If you stop to think about it (which I suggest you don't but occasionally clergy talk about these things) it seems neither appetising nor hygienic. But what evidence is there that the clergy of the Church of England have been more susceptible to disease than the average person. I am not aware of any evidence. Someone remarked to me that on the contrary many clergy seem to drag on far too long. Likewise, given that Christians regularly share the common cup is there any evidence that over the centuries they have been more prone to disease and death when compared to the rest of the population? Again I have never heard of such, and looking at many Churches today they seem

to have a healthy number of older people in them.

Our Prayer Book states that when we receive the Sacrament ‘unworthily’ we ‘provoke him to plague us with divers diseases, and sundry kinds of death’, we do not say that receiving worthily and obediently runs the same risk.

The point that seems to have raised hackles the most is the advice that only clergy should receive the wine. This smacks of the errors of the medieval Church against which the aforementioned Sacrament Act 1547 was purposely enacted. I know that some who are following the general advice on withholding the cup are also not receiving it themselves because to do otherwise is a regrettable reversion to error. There is a suspicion that some want to return to the medieval practice, though it would be unfair to attribute such a motive to the two Archbishops or the Government.

Individual Cups

The advice on individual cups has also prompted comment. First there is the fact that the Archbishops state that the practice is unlawful. They cite no actual law to substantiate this assertion and as far as I am aware there is none. There is a Legal Opinion on the matter, issued in 2007 by the Legal Advisory Commission of the General Synod. I realise that a Legal Opinion might be deemed to be a learned view on what is and is not lawful, but it is only an opinion and as anyone knows if you get a different group of lawyers together you can often get a different opinion. It remains an opinion until a legal judgement is given or a law created and there is no suggestion in the Opinion that either has happened and if they had happened the Opinion would be superfluous.

It must be said that the use of a Common Cup is an important theological principle but the Church of England does not and has never insisted on One Cup in practice. The Legal Opinion points out that larger churches and Cathedrals use several cups and although some start with a single flagon of wine many do not, nor in some places would it be possible to lift a flagon which was large enough. In my opinion the main arguments against individual cups in the Legal Opinion are weak and seem to revolve around the ablutions – who is going to wash up and how? Though they are not able to admit it this seems to reflect a Catholic view that the wine is no longer just wine and so it must be consumed to the last drop. They don’t say this, because this is contrary to the doctrine of the Church of England, but that seems to shape the advice. Therefore, although a Common Cup is important it seems to me the advice on this point is wrong. That said, the Archbishops did suggest that the risk from individual cups may be greater than that from a Common Cup, although I would have thought that with some care and cleanliness such risks can be negated.

By Faith

The Archbishops did rightly stress that in one way it is not necessary to receive the wine. Of course we can argue it is necessary in order to obey Christ’s command but in terms of receiving the benefits of the Sacrament our Church is clear that it is not absolutely necessary. This point is made very definitely in the Prayer Book Communion service. If someone is too ill to receive the bread and wine then:

the Curate shall instruct him, that if he do truly repent him of his sins, and stedfastly believe that Jesus Christ both suffered death upon the Cross for him, and shed his Blood for his redemption, earnestly remembering the benefits he hath thereby, and giving him hearty thanks therefore, he doth eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ profitably to his Soul's health, although he do not receive the Sacrament with his mouth.

The theological reason for this is set out in Article 28 “the means by which the body and blood of Christ are received is faith” and therefore if for some reason the physical bread and wine cannot be received the spiritual benefits can. Again, the only exception envisaged is a person too ill to

receive, but it does remind us that faith is the essential element, not bread and wine.

Especially at this time

There is also an interesting rubric at the start of the Sick Communion service in the Book of Common Prayer which seems to imply that rather than withholding the cup in time of plague we should actually be encouraging people to take it all the more.

Forasmuch as all mortal men be subject to many sudden perils, diseases, and sicknesses, and ever uncertain what time they shall depart out of this life; therefore, to the intent they may always be in a readiness to die, whensoever it shall please Almighty God to call them, the Curates shall diligently from time to time (but especially in the time of pestilence, or other infectious sickness) exhort their Parishioners to the often receiving of the holy Communion of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ, when it shall be publickly ministered in the Church; that so doing, they may, in case of sudden visitation, have the less cause to be disquieted for lack of the same.

I doubt that many have responded to the present situation in this way, and certainly the Archbishops have not, but perhaps that betrays reliance on worldly wisdom and our lack of trust in the wisdom of God.

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