

INTRODUCTION: Imagine before we start filling our plates at a potluck, I go to the food table, pick up a dish, and say, “Everyone listen! You all have to try this dish. It is awesome.” What did I mean by the word “dish”? Was I referring to the container the food was in? Was I saying you need to bake with the literal dish because I love the cookware? Or, was I referring to food that was in the container? Was I saying you need to eat the figurative dish because I love the recipe? Both are grammatically possible.

If I was referring to the food in the container, I was using metonymy. Metonymy is “the substitution of the name of an attribute or adjunct for that of the thing meant, for example suit for business executive” (NAOD).

“Metonymy ... is a figure of speech used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept. For instance, ‘London’, as the capital of the UK, can be used as a metonym (an instance of metonymy) for the British government” (Wikipedia). More examples: The White House refused to comment. Houston, we have a problem. When Queen Elizabeth dies, the British crown will undergo monumental change. The press has a liberal bias.

How would you decide if I was referring to the container or the food in it? Better yet, what has this got to do with religion? When observing the Lord’s Supper some brethren believe local churches may use multiple literal cups and others believe they can only use one literal cup. To decide who is correct we must answer two questions regarding the institution of the Lord’s Supper. First, was Jesus referring to a single literal cup or to what a literal cup held, i.e. the fruit of the vine? Second, if Jesus was referring to a single literal cup did He make it a third emblem in Lord’s Supper?

DISCUSSION:

First answer, Jesus was not referring to a single literal container but to the fruit of the vine, what a literal container held.

1. Jesus and the disciples likely used multiple containers. Luk 22:17, 19-20 with Mat 26:26-28.
2. The church in Jerusalem must have used multiple containers. Its membership was initially 3,000 and they continued in the breaking of bread. Act 2:41-42. Later, the amount of men grew to about 5,000. Act 4:4. For about 5,000 men and that number of women to drink out of one literal container would have required an astronomically large container—it could not be replenished and an amazingly configured container—everyone had to be able to actually drink from it—a ladle would have been a second container. No one thinks they used such a container.
3. The context makes it clear that Jesus was referring to what was in the container, not the container itself.

A. The word *porterion* or “cup” is used 33 times in the New Testament.

B. It is used 21 times outside the context of the Lord’s Supper. Literally 5 times or 24% of the time. “A cup of cold water” (Mat 10:42). “The washing of cups” (Mar 7:4). “The washing of pots and cups” (Mar 7:8). “A cup of water” (Mar 9:41). “Having a golden cup in her hand” (Rev 17:4). Figuratively 16 times or 76% of the time. It refers to suffering in Mat 20:22, 23; Mar 10:38, 39; the scribes and Pharisees in Mat 23:25, 26; Luk 11:39; the cross in Mat 26:39, 42; Mar 14:36; Luk 22:42; Joh 18:11 (Jesus used “cup” this way very soon after He instituted the Lord’s Supper); idolatry in 1 Cor 10:21; God’s indignation in Rev 14:10; the fierceness of God’s wrath in Rev 16:19; and the kingdom of Babylon in Rev 18:6. I mention the use of “cup” outside the context of the Lord’s Supper to simply show that it was very frequently used in scripture in a figurative manner.

C. It is used 12 times in the context the Lord’s Supper.

- 1) It never has to be interpreted literally.

a. An analogy. “When the kettle boils, take it off the burner.” A debate opponent asserted the word “kettle” refers to what is in the kettle, but the word “it” refers to the actual kettle. He was wrong. Pronouns refer to their antecedents. Unless the literal kettle is about to melt, the sentence means, “When the water in the kettle boils, take the water that is boiling in the kettle off the burner.”

b. There is no contextual reason why “cup” must be literal. In all 12 places we can substitute “fruit of the vine” or “the fruit of the vine” for “cup,” “a cup” or “the cup” and visa versa and it makes perfect sense.

c. Since we do not figuratively use “cup” as much today as in the past, it can be hard for us to imagine it being used figuratively. We use “dish” the way Jesus used “cup.” If we substitute “dish” for “cup” and “ate” for “drank” in Mat 14:27 we have: “When He had taken a dish and given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, ‘Eat from it, all of you.’” If this happened at a potluck you would put some casserole on your plate and eat it. It would never cross your mind to eat directly from the literal dish. Likewise, given the way people in Jesus’ day used the word “cup,” they could respond to what Jesus did and said in Mat 14:27 by drinking the fruit of the vine from different containers and not think twice about it.

d. “But Jesus used a literal cup!” True, it is the nature of consuming liquids, but the container He told his disciples to take and share among themselves by pouring its contents into their own individual containers

was more likely a pitcher. Regardless, the mere fact that he used a literal container does not mean he had it in mind when he used the word “cup.” If we ask someone to try a dish, even though it may be in a literal dish, we rarely have it in mind when we make such a request—especially when there is something to eat in it.

2) It must be interpreted figuratively. The immediate context. Mat 26:27-29. The cup was shared or divided (KJV, NKJV, ASV, ESB). Luk 22:17-18. The cup was poured out. Luke 22:20. The cup was drunk. 1 Cor 11:26. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord ... you cannot partake of the table of the Lord. 1 Cor 10:21. Partaking of the Lord’s table is clearly a figurative reference to eating the unleavened bread of the Lord’s Supper. We do not literally eat the table. Rather, we eat what is on the table. Likewise, drinking the cup of the Lord is clearly a figurative reference to drinking the fruit of the vine of the Lord’s Supper. We don’t literally drink the cup. Rather, we drink what is in the cup.

4. We do and must drink one cup but since it cannot be a single container it must be the fruit of the vine.

A. To my knowledge, the only place the word “one” and an emblem of the Lord’s Supper are used together is 1 Cor 10:16-17. Notice how Paul uses “we” and “all.” He included himself even though he was in Ephesus (1 Cor 16:8) approximately 250 miles from Corinth. Paul also had more than the Corinthians and himself in mind when he used “we” and “all.” 1 Cor 1:2.

B. The one bread is unleavened bread eaten in remembrance of Jesus’ body. This is the one bread Christians all over the world eat on the Lord’s day. Separated by continents, they nonetheless eat the one bread even though they eat it from many different loaves.

C. Paul could have said the same of the cup (explain). The one cup is fruit of the vine drunk in remembrance of Jesus’ blood. This is the one cup Christians all over the world drink on the Lord’s day. Separated by continents, they nonetheless drink the one cup even though they drink it from many different containers.

D. Some brethren say that each local church must use one cup on the Lord’s Day. I agree, but all members of the universal church must use the same cup on the Lord’s Day. Since that one cup cannot possibly be the same literal container, it must be the same figurative content, namely the fruit of the vine.

Second answer—Jesus did not make the container a third emblem of the Lord’s Supper.

1. Even if Jesus and the disciples only used one container, that does not prove we must only use one container. Many things happened when they partook of the Lord’s Supper. They put the bread and the cup on a table (Luk 22:21; Joh 13:28; 1 Cor 10:21); sat down around the same table (Luk 22:14; Mar 14:20), were inside a building (Mark 14:15; Act 20:7-12), were on the second floor of a building (Mar 14:15; Act 20:7-12), and were in a large city (Jerusalem, Corinth, Troas); etc. To be religiously significant, the use of one container or any of these other things must have been given religious significance. They were not so they are not.

2. The scriptures make it clear that there are only two emblems of religious significance in the Lord’s Supper, namely the bread and the fruit of the vine. 1 Cor 10:16; 11:26-28.

3. Brethren who say we must use only one container believe there are three emblems in the Lord’s Supper—the bread, the literal cup, and the fruit of the vine. They say the bread represents the Lord’s body, the literal cup the New Testament, and the fruit of the vine the Lord’s blood. They attempt to prove this by saying “my blood of the covenant” (Mat 26:27-28; Mar 14:23-24) and “the new covenant in my blood” (Luk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25) are different things and that the latter gives religious significance to the literal container. They fail in their attempt:

A. By making this distinction, they admit the word “cup” is used figuratively in Matthew and Mark.

B. It is unreasonable to think Matthew and Mark wrote about an emblem Luke and Paul did not mention and visa versa. The only reasonable conclusion is that the phrases say the same thing in slightly different ways.

C. The phrases can easily mean the same thing. Compare “my blood of the love of God” and “the love of God in My blood;” “my blood of the remission of sins” and “the remission of sins in My blood;” and “my blood of the hope of heaven” and “the hope of heaven in My blood.”

D. If the phrases meant different things, instead of saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant,” Jesus would have said, “This cup which is made (Act 3:25), confirmed (Gal 3:17), established (Heb 8:6), dedicated (Heb 9:18), or enjoined (Heb 9:20) for you is the new covenant.” The new covenant was not poured out. Rather, it was made, confirmed, established, dedicated, or enjoined by what was poured out. Since the cup was poured out it must represent the blood Jesus shed, not the new covenant it created.

E. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul recorded what Jesus said at a very specific time and place in history. Luke and Paul recorded what Jesus said one way and Matthew and Mark recorded what He said another way. The differences in wording can be easily and reasonably explained by assuming the Holy Spirit inspired these men to give us the essence of what Jesus said, not word for word quotes. To say two men said Jesus said one thing and two other men said Jesus said something entirely different is to deny the inspiration of scripture.

APPLICATIONS: 1. Examine everything. 1 Thes 5:21-22. 2. Accurately handle the word of truth. 2 Tim 2:15. 3. Practice the truth. Viruses are irrelevant. Rev 2:10. 4. Defend the truth. 1 Pet 3:15. 5. We must not violate our conscience but we cannot bind matters of opinion, things we cannot prove from the word of God, on other people. Rom 14:22-23, 2-3. 6. Yield to repentant but ignorant and/or weak consciences while striving to teach and strengthen them. Rom 14:19-21.