

The Mandated Element of Wine

The use of grape juice in the Lord's Supper at a congregation of our district has recently caused scandal, and threatens our fellowship in the place where it is most intimately expressed. The pastors' conference is surely the appropriate place to discuss, inform, strengthen one another in our common practice. For our historic common practice is the exclusive use of natural bread and natural wine, as the following anecdote from Luther's table talk illustrates:

When somebody inquired whether, when a sick person wished to have the sacrament but could not tolerate wine on account of nausea, something else should be given in place of the wine, the doctor [Martin Luther] replied, "This question has often been put to me and I have always given this answer: One shouldn't use anything else than wine. If a person can't tolerate wine, omit it [the sacrament] altogether in order that no innovation may be made or introduced. (Winter of 1542-43, AE 54:438)

This story explodes our modern myopia that presumes we are the first to have such pastoral concerns. But it begs the basic question of precisely why this is our common practice. What is the biblical and historical basis for our church's insistence on the exclusive use of natural wine? The following is an exposition of the historical, scriptural, and confessional data and logic that support it.

1. The Lord instituted His Supper during the last celebration of the Passover with His disciples. Though higher critics have disputed this setting, it is the clear teaching of the Synoptic Gospels.¹ The Passover meal is the historical context in which to investigate the Sacrament's institution.
2. Unfortunately for our investigation, the Old Testament knows nothing of a cup of wine in the Passover. Exodus 12 speaks only of unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and a lamb or goat. For an explanation of the cups, we need to turn to rabbinic sources.
3. The Mishna, compiled in the 2nd century AD on the basis of long-standing oral tradition, teaches: "Even the poorest in Israel must not eat unless he sits down to table, and they must not give them less than four cups of wine to drink, even if it is from the [Paupers'] Dish" (Moed, Pesahim, 10:1). Throughout the discussion the content of the cups is consistently called "wine" (יַיִן *ha-yayin*). It is sometimes referred to as "mixed", that is, diluted with water. The third cup, known as the "cup of blessing", is thought to be the cup our Lord blessed.²
4. Tosefta Moed, a later commentary on the Mishna, elaborates that the cups must contain "a volume of a quarter-log,³ whether this is straight or mixed, whether this is new or old. R. Judah says, 'But this is one condition that it has the taste and appearance of wine'" (10:1). Lacking a scientific framework, this is the closest they can come to saying that, though it may be old or new wine, good or bad, mixed or straight, it must be real wine, and this fact must be obvious to all participants.

¹ Joachim Jeremias has decisively proved that the Synoptics are to be trusted on this point. See *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 15-88.

² It is called the "cup of blessing" because of the action of the *pater familias* at that point: "After they have mixed for him the third cup he says the Benediction over his meal" (10:7)

³ A *log* is usually defined as about 300ml. Thus a quarter *log* is about 75ml. Jeremias, 67-68, addresses the question of whether each participant at the Passover had his own cup, or whether one cup was shared around the table. Later rabbinic literature (the Talmud) could be interpreted as describing the former (individual cups), in which case each person drinks 75ml per cup. But Jeremias argues that earlier Jewish practice was to share on common cup, in which case 75 ml would barely suffice for a sip each. More likely the cup was filled up and shared. In any case, the New Testament account is unequivocal that at the institution of the Lord's Supper Jesus gave one common cup to be shared by all (Mt. 26:27; Mk 14:23; Lk. 22:17, 20; I Cor. 10:16; 11:25-27).

5. The Tosefta goes on to explain the meaning of wine as an element of the Passover:
 - F. For the wine is what causes the blessing of the day to be said. ... A. It is a religious duty for a man to bring joy to his children and dependents on the festival. B. And how does he give them joy? C. With wine, since it says, ... *wine to gladden the heart of man* (Ps. 104:15). (10:3-4)
6. The emphasis on joy demonstrates that the key feature of wine is its alcoholic content, its ability to inebriate, which is further emphasized by the requirement of taking no less than four cups of wine. What of the weak, who cannot handle this? Rabbi Judah says, “[One gives to] women what is suitable for them, and to children what is suitable to them” (Tosefta Moed 10:4). He offers no further explanation of what this means, but since he has previously referred to the possibility of diluting the wine with water, this would seem to be what he has in mind.
7. Joachim Jeremias points out that “In everyday life water was drunk. The daily breakfast consisted of ‘bread with salt, and a tankard of water’, and even at the main meal bread and water were the chief ingredients”.⁴ Jesus’ words to the woman at the well (John 4) confirm that water was the basic staple of life. Wine thus served a different function. Aside from the Last Supper, only twice is it reported that Jesus drank wine: in Matt. 11:19 (in which Jesus’ festive meals with tax collectors and sinners are reported), and in John 2 (in which Jesus provides copious amounts of high quality wine for the wedding at Cana). Jeremias assumes rightly that Jesus would have drunk wine at the festive meals to which He was invited, but otherwise would have drunk water in the customary fashion. But the Last Supper was different. Here, as we have seen, it was the duty of every participant to drink wine—four cups, according to the Mishna. There can be no doubt that Jesus and His disciples observed this rule in their final observance of the Passover. The contents of the cup Jesus blessed and distributed was wine.
8. It may also be possible that the use of wine carried medicinal connotations, as it was normally applied together with oil to effect cleansing and healing (Lk. 10:34). Certainly the gift of wine was prophesied⁵ as a feature of the Messianic age to which the Passover pointed, whose fulfilment began with Christ’s gift at Cana and continues in the Lord’s Supper.
9. What kind of wine Christ used cannot be determined with precision. Jeremias makes the assumption that it must have been red wine because he holds to a symbolic view of the Lord’s Supper. If it represents blood, it must have been red wine, he concludes.⁶ We Lutherans have no sympathy for this view. In fact, as Jeremias demonstrates from the Talmud, white, red, and “black” wine were readily available. Some later rabbinic sources lay down the rule that only red wine may be used at the Passover, but it is uncertain whether this held for the early first century. Thus, there can be no requirement that a particular colour of wine be used for the Lord’s Supper.⁷
10. We have established that Jesus most certainly used wine in instituting the Lord’s Supper. What should we make of the fact that He speaks of the cup containing “the fruit of the vine”? Some have asserted that Jesus thereby permits us to use grape juice, but this conclusion is illegitimate. Firstly, Jesus does not use the normal word for “fruit” καρπός, which might be used of something like grapes.⁸ Instead He uses the noun γένημα, from the verb γίνομαι, which might better be translated “product”. Thus, we should translate “product of the vine”, which more naturally refers to something like wine which is

⁴ Jeremias, 51.

⁵ E.g. Jer. 31:12; Hos. 2:22; Joel 2:19, 24; 3:18; Amos 9:13.

⁶ Jeremias, 53.

⁷ Indeed, prior to modern times, Lutheran practice was almost universally to use white wine: firstly because that was what was normally available in Germany; secondly because it functioned confessionally against a symbolic view of the Sacrament.

⁸ The common Greek words for the grape or a bunch of grapes are σταφυλή and βότρυς.

“produced”. Secondly, Jesus has not invented this phrase, but quotes a standard, rabbinic technical term used in blessing the wine in the Passover cup. Thus, any Jew would recognize “product of the vine” as a liturgical phrase referring to wine. Thirdly, it is a basic linguistic and logical error to conclude that, because Jesus referred to the contents of the cup as “product of the vine”, He was permitting us to use **any** product of the vine. By this logic we would be as justified in using pumpkin juice as grape juice, for it, too, is “product of the vine”. By this logic, when our Lord on the cross said to His mother, “Woman, behold, your son” (Jn 19:26), He was permitting each and every “woman” to take John as her son. No, He was referring to one particular woman: Mary. So also at the Last Supper Jesus did **not** say, “You make take anything that is ‘product of the vine’ and use it in the repetition of this meal.” No, He took a cup of wine, referred to it by a common technical term as “product of the vine”, and mandated us to do what He did.

11. The Formula of Concord is therefore on solid historical and theological ground when it concludes: “For since Christ gave this command at table and during supper, there can be no doubt that he was speaking of true, natural bread and natural wine as well as of oral eating and drinking”.⁹ Such words, which are binding on Lutheran pastors, exclude all substitutions. Neither grape juice nor so-called “de-alcoholized wine” satisfy these criteria. For though the latter was surely wine once, with the alcohol removed it is wine no longer.¹⁰ Some have argued that de-alcoholized wine is chemically identical to natural wine, albeit with a lower amount of alcohol (usually 0.5%).¹¹ This is, however, a contradiction in terms, for the essential meaning of the word “wine” (from יַיִן *yayin* in Hebrew, οἶνος in Greek) is fermentation and the presence of alcohol.¹² If we do what the Lord did, if we use what He used, the Formula of Concord concludes, we will have no doubt. The substitution of different elements introduces considerable doubt that we have the gifts the Lord intends to give us. And faith is the very opposite of doubt. Faith clings only to that which is sure and certain.

Ultimately, then, we are left with a theological and hermeneutical question that takes us beyond these questions of history. The “Lord’s Supper” is called the “Lord’s” because He instituted it and gave it to us for our good. He instructed us to carry it out in His church according to His mandate. His mandate is that we do it as He did it, that men who represent Him in the Holy Office of the Ministry should take bread and wine, consecrating them with the words He gave us, and giving them to repentant and believing Christians to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Because it is the “Lord’s Supper”, not man’s supper, we may not change it to conform to our desires, weaknesses, or unfaith (I Cor. 11:20). For it is indeed unfaith to believe that our Lord would give us something that would harm us. We confess with Luther in the Large Catechism:

We must never regard the sacrament as a harmful thing from which we should flee, but as a pure, wholesome, soothing medicine which aids and quickens us in both soul and body. For where the soul is healed, the body has benefited also. Why, then, do we act as if the sacrament were a poison which would kill us if we ate of it? (LC V:68)

⁹ “von rechtem, natürlichen Brot und von natürlichen Wein” (FC SD 7:48).

¹⁰ Use of de-alcoholized wine is akin to ordaining a transsexual (a “woman” who used to be a man), and believing that Christ’s mandate has been satisfied.

¹¹ See, e.g., “Is ‘Non-Alcoholic Wine’ Really Wine?”, *Concordia Journal* (Jan. 1991): 4-6, which cautiously approves the use of this product—though provides no scriptural, confessional, or historical data to support this opinion!

¹² In Greek there is a different word for unfermented grape juice or “must” out of which wine is made: τρῦξ. See BDAG, 701. That fermentation is the key component of meaning is clear from the fact that fermented beverages made from fruits other than grapes can still be called “wine” (such as peach or dandelion wine), though they are not included in Christ’s mandate to use what He used, and so may not be used in the Lord’s Supper. Neither is grape juice or “de-alcoholized” grape wine included in His mandate, since they are not natural wine.

If such fears lead us to alter what Christ has given, we risk losing entirely His benefits:

For we must believe and be sure of this, ... that the Sacrament does not belong to us but to Christ, ... Therefore we cannot make anything else out of it but must act according to His command and hold it. However, if we alter or “improve” on it, then it becomes a nothing and Christ is no longer present, nor is His order.¹³

On the other hand, where faith clings to the Word of Christ and the Sacrament is kept as one undivided whole as He mandated it, it is filled with rich blessings:

See, then, what a beautiful, great, marvelous thing this is, how everything meshes together in one sacramental reality. The words are the first thing, for without the words the cup and the bread would be nothing. Further, without bread and cup, the body and blood of Christ would not be there. Without the body and blood of Christ, the new testament would not be there. Without the new testament, forgiveness of sins would not be there. Without forgiveness of sins, life and salvation would not be there. Thus the words first connect the bread and cup to the sacrament; bread and cup embrace the body and blood of Christ; body and blood of Christ embrace the new testament; the new testament embraces the forgiveness of sins; forgiveness of sins embraces eternal life and salvation. See, all this the words of the Supper offer and give us, and we embrace it by faith. Ought not the devil, then, hate such a Supper and rouse fanatics against it?¹⁴

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¹³ Luther, *Concerning the Private Mass and the Ordination of Priests* (1533), WA 38:240.24; AE 38:200.

¹⁴ Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper* (1528), AE 37:338.