

On the use of grape juice and wine when observing the Lord's Supper

Adopted by the Session of Covenant Church on April 19, 2022

Regarding the proper administration of the Lord's Supper according to the Westminster Standards, in the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC) Q&A 96, we read:

What is the Lord's supper?

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to Christ's appointment, his death is showed forth (Luke 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26); and the worthy receiver are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their spiritual nourishment, and growth in grace (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

and in the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) Q&A 168, we read:

What is the Lord's Supper?

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the new testament (Luke 22:20), wherein, by giving and receiving bread and wine according to the appointment of Jesus Christ, his death is showed forth; and they that worthily communicate feed upon his body and blood, to their spiritual nourishment and growth in grace (Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:23-26); have their union and communion with him confirmed (1 Cor. 10:16); testify and renew their thankfulness (1 Cor. 11:24), and engagement to God (1 Cor. 10:14-16, 21; Rom. 7:4), and their mutual love and fellowship with each other, as members of the same mystical body (1 Cor. 10:17).

How is "wine" to be properly understood? Does grape juice satisfy the requirements? Should only grape juice or wine be served, or can both forms be served concurrently?

Arguments in favor of using wine exclusively

According to Mathison (2002), wine is referenced throughout Scripture as a gift (Gen. 14:18-20; Ex. 29:38-40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5-10, 28:7), a gracious blessing from God (Gen. 27:28; Deut. 7:12-13, 11:13-14, 14:22-26; Judg. 9:13; Ps. 104:14-15; Prov. 3:9-10; Amos 9:13-14), and as a symbol for things that are unquestionably good (Isa. 55:1; Cant. 1:4, 4:10, 7:6-9, 8:2) (pp. 298-299). But like all good things, sinful man can abuse wine (Job 12:25; Ps. 107:27; Prov. 20:1, 23:20-21, 29-33; Isa. 5:11, 22, 28:7-8).

Mathison is careful to note that “[f]or the first 1,800 years of the church, the use of wine in the Lord’s Supper was an undisputed and noncontroversial practice” (2002, p. 298). The use of wine is clearly defended in Reformed confessions, including the Belgic Confession (Article 35), the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 79), and the Second Helvetic Confession (Chapter 19), in addition to the Westminster Standards (the aforementioned WSC Q&A 96 and WLC Q&A 168). It is also defended in the writings of Reformed theologians, including Robert Bruce, William Ames, Francis Turretin, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Jonathan Edwards, Herman Witsius, Charles Hodge, A.A. Hodge, R.L. Dabney, W.G.T. Shedd, B.B. Warfield, John Murray, and Louis Berkof (Mathison, 2002, p. 302).

Thus, the introduction of the use of grape juice in lieu of wine “had its origins, not in the study of Scripture, but in the capitulation of the American evangelical church to the demands of the nineteenth-century temperance movement” (Mathison, 2002, p. 298), and could not have been made “until the discovery of pasteurization, was wine, the fermented fruit of the vine” (Mahaffy, 2011, p. 52).

Those defending the use of grape juice for the Lord’s Supper often hail from the Baptist tradition, including theologians A.H. Strong, William W. Stevens, and Millard Erickson. Mathison answers their objections to the use of wine on two grounds:

1. On the grounds of obedience. “If bread and wine were the elements that Christ ordained to be used, then we have no more right to change them than we have to use something instead of water in baptism” (2002, p. 307).
2. On the grounds that the Lord’s Supper is more than symbolic. “But if basic symbolism is all that matters, then it would not matter whether Jesus and the apostles baptized only by means of immersion” (2002, p. 307). Mathison states this not, I think, to defend the practice of immersion, but to reject the arguments of Strong, Stevens, and Erickson as insufficient by their own admission that sprinkling is not justified for baptism.

What of the “weaker brother” (Rom. 14:21), the one who struggles with alcoholism or has taken vows to abstain from alcohol? According to Williamson, “Those who seek to impose their scruple of conscience on others usurp the authority of Christ” (1976, p. 21; cf. Rom. 14:22). For the one who struggles with alcoholism, the use of wine in the Lord’s Supper can be a means of sanctifying the brother, helping him to mortify his sinful desires (Williamson, 1976, pp. 22-24). For the one who has taken vows to abstain from alcohol, Williamson concludes that “a man who has taken an unscriptural vow of perpetual and total abstinence should renounce this vow, even if he has every intention of continuing the practice of total abstinence” (Williamson, 1976, pp. 34-35).

Arguments in favor of using both elements

While fermented wine was almost certainly used when Christ instituted the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:17-30; Mk. 14:12-26; Lu. 22:7-38) and likely continued as the practice of the early church (1 Cor. 11:17-34), nonetheless "it does not necessarily imply that another form of the fruit of the vine is inadequate" (Mahaffy, 2011, p. 52). Mahaffy cites the conclusion of one session of an unnamed church, that the "Bible draws no distinction between wine and grape juice or between fermented and unfermented wine" (2011, p. 52)

Likewise, Williamson notes that the Bible does not make a distinction between fermented and unfermented wine. According to Williamson, "A careful study of the Hebrew and Greek terms reveal no such distinction [endorsing unfermented wine while condemning fermented wine] in Scripture" (Williamson, 1976, pp. 11-12), whether referencing "wine" (Gen. 9:21, 14:18; 19:32-35; 1 Sam. 25:37; 1 Chr. 27:27; 2 Chr. 11:11; Neh. 5:18; Est. 1:7-10; Isa. 28:1-7; Jer. 23:9), "new wine" (Gen. 27:28, 37; Num. 18:12; Deut. 7:13, 11:14, 14:23; Prov. 3:9-10), "strong drink" (1 Sam. 1:15; Gen. 9:21, 43:34; Isa. 49:26; Prov. 20:1; Lev. 10:9; Num. 6:3; Deut. 14:26; Dan. 5; Deut. 32:14), "sweet wine" (Isa. 49:26; Joel 3:17-18; Amos 9:13), "liquor" (Deut. 21:20; Prov. 23:20), "mixed wine" (Prov. 23:30; Isa. 65:11), "lees" or "dregs" (Isa. 25:6; Jer. 48:11). The closest reference in the Bible to grape juice is "grapes" or "the blood of grapes" (Gen. 40:10-11; Lev. 25:5; Neh. 13:15; Num. 13:20; Amos 9:13; Gen. 40:10-11; Deut. 32:14), but "Scripture does not make a distinction between the blood of the grape and fermented wine and strong drink, as if the one were permitted to God's people and the other not" (Williamson, 1976, p. 13).

In his *Institutes*, John Calvin concluded that the choice of particular elements are matters of indifference and liberty. He writes,

In regard to the external form of the ordinance, whether or not believers are to take into their hands and divide among themselves, or each is to eat what is given to him: whether they are to return the cup to the deacon or hand it to their neighbor; whether the bread is to be leavened or unleavened, and the wine to be red or white, is of no consequence. These things are indifferent, and left free to the church. (Calvin, 2008, p. 928 [IV.17.43])

However, it should also be noted that Calvin would have assumed the use of wine and not grape juice. It may have been a matter of indifference to choose between cabernet sauvignon and merlot, but not a matter of indifference in his mind to choose between fermented and unfermented grapes.

Finally, as a point of personal privilege, I would note that there are some conditions in which consumption of either alcohol or sugars are unhealthful to the individual (e.g., Prader-Willi syndrome; Akefeldt, 2009). Either element would have to be sanctified unto the body of the recipient, and thus are not sufficient grounds in favor of the exclusive use of either element.

If we do not hold with Williamson that a vow of abstinence from alcohol is unlawful, at the very least we must conclude that grape juice must be made available, as it would be unlawful to pressure a man against his own conscience (WCF 22.4; Rom. 14-15).

Summary points:

1. A strong emphasis on obedience would suggest using wine as originally instituted by Christ without any revision, rather than following (or “capitulating to”) the temperance movement when many evangelical churches began substituting grape juice for wine. This seems to be the strongest argument in favor of fermented wine only.
2. A close reading of Scripture suggests little to no biblical distinction between fermented and unfermented wine. This seems to be the strongest argument in favor of both fermented and unfermented wine, or unfermented wine only.
3. Alcoholism, vows to temperance, and dietary restrictions are insufficient reasons for choosing elements.

References

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