

# WINE OR GRAPE JUICE

## THEOLOGICAL AND PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FRUIT OF THE VINE IN COMMUNION<sup>1</sup>

For many years, probably from the time of the organization of this church as a separate congregation, the body has used grape juice in the Lord's Supper. Recently the session has begun to look at the issue of using wine, either in place of or in addition to grape juice. As members of the congregation responded to a request for input it became clear that this is an issue on which opinions run strong and not all in the same direction. This paper is a brief effort to reflect on some of the theological, ecclesiological, and pastoral issues involved in what is a complex question. It is not intended to provide a definitive answer on whether to use wine or grape juice. Rather it is a way of formulating my own thoughts and suggesting questions that we ought to address together as we look at the issue of the substance in the communion cup.

### A Complex Question

Although the issue involves the sacraments and can be studied as part of that element of theology, it is helpful to look at other aspects. The reasons for changing from wine to grape juice involve history, both of the church and of American and other cultures. Questions of ethics and Christian liberty are involved. One's tradition, world and life view, and emotions may have as much to do with the position adopted on this issue as do specific theological or exegetical arguments. Enfolded all these other questions ought to be the question of the impact of our discussion and decisions on the unity of the body of Christ. Are we acting in love?

Without developing the positions in detail here, I am convinced that what was used in the Lord's Supper in the New Testament church and throughout the history of the church until the discovery of pasteurization, was wine, the fermented fruit of the vine. The transition from wine to unfermented grape juice appears to have had far more to do with the temperance (or, more accurately, abstinence) movement than with either exegetical or theological argumentation.<sup>2</sup> Particularly helpful is the booklet by G. I. Williamson, *Wine in the Bible & the Church*.<sup>3</sup> This traces the capitulation of the church to the pressures of social movements, using as a case study the former United Presbyterian Church of North America, of which the author was at one time a member. Williamson carefully examines Scriptural teaching on the subject and also details the way that this church not only went beyond Scripture but departed from it in requiring total abstinence. He emphasizes the tragic consequences of the church binding the conscience with man-made rules. The use of wine as our Lord instituted the sacrament and its use in much of the history of the church give me sympathy for the position that today the use of wine is more appropriate than grape juice in the Lord's Supper.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented to the session of Trinity Presbyterian Church of the OPC, Newberg, Oregon.

<sup>2</sup> See the eleven part series by Dr. Robert S. Rayburn, pastor of Faith PCA, Tacoma, [http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/Revising\\_Communion/communion.htm](http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/Revising_Communion/communion.htm). See also the fourth part of "The Pattern of Worship at Michiana Covenant Church," <http://www.michianacovenant.org/worship.html>. I have found both sources very helpful, although both may overstate their positions at certain points.

<sup>3</sup> G. I. Williamson, *Wine in the Bible & the Church* (Pilgrim Publishing Co. 1976, reprinted 1980). Out of print, but a scanned copy is available at: [http://www.nethtc.net/~giwopc/Wine\\_Book.pdf](http://www.nethtc.net/~giwopc/Wine_Book.pdf).

It may be helpful to keep in mind that we are dealing with two separate, though intertwined issues. The first is the appropriate and best observance of the Lord's Supper, what we might call the sacramental issue. The second is that of Christian liberty. We would do well to identify aspects of the question that relate to each issue and be cautious about confusing the two.

## Sacramental Concerns

Some of the arguments that I have read favoring the use of wine in communion almost sound as though those using grape juice are disobeying a direct command to use wine.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps it is worth noting that the accounts of institution in the Gospels do not mention wine by name, but the cup (which, clearly, I believe, contained wine, not grape juice). It is helpful to keep in mind the breadth of the Scriptural use of the language of wine, representing both the wrath of God, who makes his enemies drink the dregs of his cup,<sup>5</sup> and his rich blessing (wine gladdens the heart, it is offered without money and without price – and that picturing the offer of God's free grace!<sup>6</sup>). While all of this makes it appropriate to use wine in the sacrament, as our Lord did when he instituted the meal, it does not necessarily imply that another form of the fruit of the vine is inadequate. Just as some who once argued for grape juice to replace wine failed to grasp a Biblical balance, so some today, perhaps in reaction, seem to place more emphasis on fermentation of the fruit of the vine than the Bible itself does. One session, after admitting that “The Bible draws no distinction between wine and grape juice or between fermented and unfermented wine,” goes on to assert: “Grape juice is dead, but wine has passed from death to life through fermentation.”

Near the beginning of his discussion of the Lord's Supper in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin comments with his usual grasp of Biblical balance: “We must neither, by setting too little value on the signs, dissever them from their meanings to which they are in some degree annexed, nor by immoderately extolling them, seem somewhat to obscure the mysteries themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Scripture focuses on the crucified Christ presented to us in the bread and the cup, and does not emphasize some of the details involved. Those details are of secondary importance, as Calvin later observes: “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 neighbour; 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, though it is certain that it was the custom of the ancient Church for all to receive into their hand.”<sup>8</sup> Although it would be anachronistic to read the fermentation issue into Calvin's discussion, his principle of dealing with vital matters and being less rigorous about others is a solid one.

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<sup>4</sup> One session's position paper on the issue concludes with: “If the Lord Jesus Christ has indeed commanded us to use wine, is it not dangerous for us to intentionally keep this powerful covenantal symbol of blessing and curse from our celebrations of the Lord's Supper?”

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 75:8; Is. 51:17.

<sup>6</sup> Ps. 104:15; Is. 55:1. References could be multiplied on both sides.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964 printing) IV, XVII. 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Institutes*, IV, XVII. 43.

As far as the sacramental issue is concerned, I believe we can conclude that neither the use of wine nor the use of grape juice is *wrong* in the observance of the sacrament, although there is strong Biblical precedent for the use of wine. In my own view the issue of frequency of observance is of considerably more weight than questions about the details of the bread and the cup.

## **The Issue of Christian Liberty**

The issue of Christian liberty<sup>9</sup> is complex and affects the observance of the Lord's Supper. Again, without arguing what might need more development in some circumstances, while the Scriptures clearly condemn drunkenness, the beverage use of alcohol in moderation is morally indifferent.<sup>10</sup> It is not wrong to partake, and it is not wrong to abstain. Either can be done to the glory of God. The stronger brother is under obligation not to despise the weaker brother nor to set before him an occasion to sin, and the weaker brother must refrain from condemning the stronger. Perhaps the best brief treatment of the principles of Christian liberty is John Murray's article, "The Weak and the Strong," in which he discusses the classic passages, Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8.<sup>11</sup> Murray identifies the issues involved in these Scriptures, and carefully outlines the respective responsibilities of both the weaker and the stronger brother. A close reading of this article ought to precede decisions on this subject.

It may be helpful for those who use alcoholic beverages to reflect on the great abuse of alcohol out of which came pressure to abstain. Historically this abuse was recognized, not only in fundamentalistic circles but also in some branches of Presbyterianism,<sup>12</sup> to the point that some churches required total abstinence for members, or at least for officers.<sup>13</sup> In this setting some have taken vows to abstain. Remembering the binding nature of an oath, since a vow to abstain from alcohol does not bind the swearer to sin, I do not believe it is wrong to continue to keep such an oath, even though the person may no longer believe that the Bible requires abstinence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, "20 Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience," especially Section 2: "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."

<sup>10</sup> In discussions of Christian liberty "indifference" becomes a technical term referring to something that God neither commands nor forbids. Ultimately nothing that we do is indifferent to God, and we should be able either to use or to refrain from using to his glory.

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 9, "The Weak and the Strong," *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Volume 4 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982) 142-157, originally published in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. XII, 2, 1950, available at <http://www.reformedliterature.com/murray-the-weak-and-the-strong.php>.

<sup>12</sup> In reading John Paton's autobiography, as a minor side note in what is one of the best missionary autobiographies, I was struck by his strong advocacy of total abstinence, which he specifically contrasts with temperance, in dealing with drunkenness in Glasgow more than 160 years ago. *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprinted 2007) 38.

<sup>13</sup> Until fairly recently true of a church with which the OPC has close fraternal relations, The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America. See also Williamson's *Wine in the Bible & the Church*.

<sup>14</sup> Williamson argues to the contrary, "Thus we conclude 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." 34-35.

The church ought not to pressure the person otherwise.<sup>15</sup> Likewise those who abstain ought to reflect on the long history of God’s people enjoying wine as his gift and using it to God’s glory without falling into drunkenness. Particularly for those for whom alcohol abuse (drunkenness) has involved sin and pain in their lives or their family members, it may be difficult to appreciate this, but they need to distinguish proper use from abuse.

I believe that the church continues to need instruction on the matter of Christian liberty,<sup>16</sup> but that we ought to be cautious not to use the Lord’s Supper as a lever in this issue.

### **A Pastoral Approach To Practical Concerns**

As we consider the possible use of wine in the sacrament, we also need to keep in mind that in many churches are members or visitors who have had or continue to have a struggle with drunkenness and may not be confident of their partaking of even a small amount of wine without fear of falling back into sin. We need not determine how substantial this lack of confidence is to appreciate that this is where some people are at this point in their sanctification. Williamson appears to overstate his case when he argues that, “The *only* source of danger [for the alcoholic being tempted to drunkenness] is man’s sinful heart.”<sup>17</sup> Total depravity affects the whole person, the body as well as the heart, and the church needs to be sensitive to that. Murray, with careful pastoral concern, writes: “. . . in some cases the cost of sobriety is total abstinence. The words of our Lord apply. It is better to enter into life with one eye than having two eyes to go into the hell of fire. True believers afflicted with such a temptation to excess must be dealt with very tenderly and sympathetically.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet the use of the vine in the form of wine can encourage and be a means of grace precisely to those who have struggled with immoderate use of alcohol and have found forgiveness and new life in Christ. One of our members tells of a church she knows where many members have come from skid road with a strong history of drunkenness, from which they have repented. Some of those members testify to the liberating joy of receiving Christ in the sacrament in the same substance to which they once were enslaved. I sent an early draft of this paper to a fellow pastor who has been through that struggle (and now abstains), asking him to comment particularly on the occasions when he experiences wine in the communion service. He responded (and I quote with his permission): “I do not have trouble or temptation if the sacrament has wine. It did take a while. To this day, when I know that there is fermented wine, I say within myself, ‘my Lord, I drink this as an act of worship.’” He also recalled an occasion several years ago when the wine was unexpectedly strong: “As I was serving the sacrament and drank that wine – wow! The bells went off, the whistles rang in my soul – and I responded in silent prayer, ‘Thank you, Lord, for the reminder of my addiction!’”

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<sup>15</sup> Ps. 15:4, and WCF 22.4 “Of Lawful Oaths and Vows” (emphasis added): “An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation. It cannot oblige to sin; but *in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance*, although to a man’s own hurt.”

<sup>16</sup> Romans 14 will provide a natural setting for such instruction when the present series on Romans reaches that chapter.

<sup>17</sup> Williamson, 23, emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> “The Weak and the Strong” 148–149.

What is the range of saints to whom we are serving the cup? Some may be convinced that the appropriate contents of the cup ought to be wine. Others may have a preference for that, but not a conviction on the issue. Others may be indifferent on the issue. Some may simply be uncomfortable with their own use of wine, but not believe it is wrong for others. Still others may believe they would be sinning to use any wine, or may be bound by an oath previously taken (whether or not that oath was a good one to take). And there may be those who fear that they would be causing others to sin by partaking of wine. There may be a few who for medical reasons or because of having had aversion therapy cannot partake of wine. We would do well to encourage all sides to be cautious to avoid imposing their preferences on others, but rather to approach the issue with love.

Given this breadth, it appears to me that, if the session is going to move towards using wine in the Lord's Supper, it would be wise, at least for quite some time,<sup>19</sup> to have both wine and grape juice available in the trays. Robert S. Rayburn's concluding lecture puts it well as he reports the decision of the session of Faith PCA, Tacoma, to add wine to the communion trays:

I say "add" wine, because we will continue to offer grape juice for those who prefer it. We realize that generations have come and gone since grape juice became the accepted substitute for wine in the Protestant evangelical Lord's Supper. It is a deeply engrained practice and there are many who not only prefer grape juice to wine, but are convinced that wine ought not to be used. There are such people in this congregation and in other congregations of our own Presbyterian Church in America and other evangelical churches. We know that. We do not think it right to expect that everyone will come to our convictions as quickly as we have. And we do not want to put an obstacle in the way of any Christian's sincere and happy participation in the Lord's Supper here. Nor are we a congregation in isolation. We are part of the world of evangelical Protestantism and we are fully aware of the difference of conviction on this point that can be found throughout that world. We want our Supper to be accessible to all.<sup>20</sup>

(I am unimpressed with the pastoral impact of making those who request grape juice stand out uncomfortably, perhaps by having to ask to be served a separate cup.) Including both wine and grape juice may help separate the sacramental issue from that of Christian liberty. Were the session to begin this practice, the use of different forms of the fruit of the vine in the tray may be seen by some as detracting somewhat from the unity expressed in the one cup of the sacrament. However, the two forms of the fruit of the vine in one tray probably has less impact on symbolism than the replacement of a single common cup with individual glasses.<sup>21</sup>

Our discussions and decisions as a session need to keep in mind not only the theological issues involved in the sacrament but the pastoral effects on the flock as well. Our actions ought to encourage not only theological maturity but practical, loving sanctification.

John W. Mahaffy  
Trinity Presbyterian Church of the OPC  
Newberg, OR

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<sup>19</sup> Which is a polite way of saying, "for the foreseeable future," for reasons outlined in the following quote.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/Revising\\_Communion/Revising\\_FPC\\_LordsSupper\\_No.11\\_Conclusion\\_May.06.2001.htm](http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/Revising_Communion/Revising_FPC_LordsSupper_No.11_Conclusion_May.06.2001.htm)

<sup>21</sup> I have had occasion to partake of the Lord's Supper where a common cup was used but suspect that current concerns about hygiene would make that a difficult choice today. While it was apparently one cup that our Lord passed to his disciples, Scripture is not clear that a single common cup is mandated for proper observance.