

Brothers and Sisters,

The session of Covenant Church recently decided to offer grape juice and wine in the Lord's Supper. This decision has been made after much study, prayer, and reflection. We considered the biblical, confessional, and historic Reformed positions on the elements of the Lord's Supper. Based on what the Bible teaches, we have decided to offer both fermented and non-fermented fruit of the vine.

This brief paper explains the reasons for the change.

First, biblical reasons.

The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took a cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom." (Matt 26:27-29). The biblical question is, "What was in the cup?"

Biblical exegesis of relevant passages related to the Lord's Supper would necessitate a reading of the cup containing wine. In the original text, the "fruit of the vine" is the phrase *genematos tes ampelou*. Which could also be translated "offspring of the vine". Strong's Concordance explains the "fruit of the vine" as referring "to a vine, particularly a grapevine, which is a plant that produces grapes".

But was the wine or fruit of the vine alcoholic? Almost assuredly, yes. Without refrigeration or modern food science, there was no way to stop the fermenting process which produces alcohol. The fermentation process naturally begins within 24-72 hours after squeezing grapes. Of course, we do not know when the grapes in the cup were pressed, but most likely this wine contained alcohol. This would explain the Jewish practice of mixing the wine with water to avoid drunkenness.

Additionally, there is a chronological consideration. Grapes in ancient Palestine were harvested in late summer to early fall (July to September). The Jewish Passover was held before the harvest in the spring (April or May). This timeline necessitates that the content of the Passover cup was fermented fruit of the vine.

Given the historical context and the rabbinic writings from the first century, the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*, we know that the wine or fruit of the vine used during Passover was often mixed in a 3:1 ratio, water to wine. Most likely, the Lord Jesus raised up a cup of wine mixed with water.

According to Reformed theologian Keith Mathison, in his work *Given for You*, 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; John 2), 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 unquestionably good things (Isa 55:1; Cant 1:4, 4:10, 7:6-9, 8:2) (pp. 298-299). But as with 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). Abuse of something good is not a legitimate reason to forbid its proper use in a way that Christ commands.

Second, the Westminster Standards interpret Holy Scriptures' use of the "fruit of the vine" as wine.

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:

Q: What is the Lord's supper?

A: 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).

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

Q: What is the Lord's Supper?

A: 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).

We believe our confessional documents are faithful summaries of scripture. They are not equal to scripture or inerrant, but they are helpful guides to a proper understanding of Scripture. These documents, with one voice, interpret the references to the substance of the cup as wine.

Third, the historic practice of the church supports the use of wine.

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” (Mathison, *Given for You*, p. 298). The use of wine is defended in the Reformed confessions: Belgic Confession (Article 35), the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 79), the Second Helvetic Confession (Chapter 19), and the aforementioned Westminster Standards (WSC Q&A 96, 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 Berko (Mathison, *Given for You*, 2002, p. 302).

Thus, the introduction of the use of grape juice in place 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, *Given for You*, 2002, p. 298). The argument favoring grape juice could not have been made until the discovery of pasteurization in the 1860s.

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 chiefly on the grounds of obedience to scripture, stating “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.” (Mathison, *Given for You*, p. 307)

Arguments in favor of using both elements

Fermented fruit of the vine 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, as Reformed minister John Mahaffy notes, “it does not necessarily imply that another form of the fruit of the vine is inadequate” (Mahaffy, *Ordained Servant*). 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” (Ibid)

Likewise, G.I. Williamson notes that, “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 Holy Scripture is 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 Bible does not make a distinction between fermented and unfermented wine. The closest reference in scripture 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 the *Institutes*, John Calvin concludes that the choice of particular elements is a matter 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 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 sauvignon blanc, but not a matter of indifference, in his mind, to choose between fermented and unfermented grapes.

Finally, how we came to our decision:

This was not a simple decision. This matter arose in a session meeting from the desire to be faithful to scripture while protecting liberty of conscience. Above all, we desire to be obedient to the commands of the Lord Jesus while preserving the biblical doctrine of liberty of conscience. Assuredly, there are strong opinions on this matter within the church.

Ultimately, the session has decided to offer both wine and grape juice, hoping this will protect and preserve the consciences of all. Those who believe fermented wine is commanded to be used and those who believe grape juice meets the requirement should be equally respected. Romans 14 was influential as we sought the Lord’s will. The Apostle reminds us to “not pass judgment on one another” (Rom 14:13) regarding matters of conscience. Only the word of God can bind the consciences of men. We pray that by offering both options, individual consciences can stand on scripture while participating in communion. We believe, offering both allows us to “pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding” (Rom 14:19). This meal is not to be a point of division, but of sweet concord. May we love each other well and bear with one another in Christ Jesus.

References:

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