

THE USE OF WINE IN THE LORD'S SUPPER

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Historical

Why does the History Matter?

The reformed principle of *semper reformanda* means to always be reforming. This principle is only correctly practiced with another reformed principle, *sola Scriptura*. As Christians, we must always seek to use the Bible to transform our lives. But when we stray from this correct method of reforming the Church, we are in grave danger. This is exactly what happened when part of the Church changed the historical practice of using wine for the Lord's Supper.

The Historical Practice of the Church

Indeed, using wine for the cup in the Lord's Supper was the common practice of the Church until the 19th century. In fact, grape juice, or "unfermented wine" as it was originally called, was only invented in 1869 by Thomas Welch. Though, rarely is that fact neglected. Rather, it is glossed over as though it brings no difficulty. This is clearly seen in this quote from the United Methodist Book of Worship¹: (Underlining added)

Although the historic and ecumenical Christian practice has been to use wine, the use of unfermented grape juice by The United Methodist Church and its predecessors since the late nineteenth century expresses pastoral concern for recovering alcoholics, enables the participation of children and youth, and supports the church's witness of abstinence.

While this quote includes multiple reasons why the change happened, it is the last one that I will start with. To be sure, using grape juice definitely "supports the church's witness of abstinence", but it is that very witness that neglects Scripture. It is also this view of wine that was the driving factor to switch to grape juice in the first place. Not only did grape juice benefit the quest for teetotalism (complete abstinence from wine), it was the very reason grape juice was invented. Here is Charles Welch, Thomas' son, saying just that in his dad's obituary²:

In 1869, Dr. Welch originated a method of preserving wine in an unfermented state, especially for church communion services. This was an entirely new idea, and it involved a departure from an old custom and the initiation of a new practice. Much time, patience, and money were required to introduce it into the churches but it had finally become the established wine of communion. Before leaving his practice in dentistry, he had prepared this wine and had introduced it on a small scale into the neighboring churches. The Welch grape juice was originally prepared and intended simply for local use; but gradually the demands for it became more than local, and the preparation of it necessarily assumed the form of a business. The industry grew slowly until 1890, since which the time Dr. Welch had devoted his exclusive attention to it, and it had assumed vast proportions. The demands have doubled every year, as it was extensively used by physicians in their practices, in fountains, and for social gatherings. Dr. Welch had built up a business that extended all over the country.

¹ *The United Methodist book of worship* (United Methodist Pub. House, 1992), pg. 28.

² Welch, Charles (1903) "Dr. Thomas B. Welch." Wayback Machine. <https://web.archive.org/web/20050915130116/http://www.vineland.org/history/welchs/DrTBWelch.html>. Archived from: Vineland. <http://www.vineland.org/history/welchs/DrTBWelch.html>

The Problem with Teetotalism

The group that advocated teetotalism was known as the temperance movement. This movement started in the 1800s when drunkenness among men became a widespread issue. These sinful acts required correct action, but the temperance movement promoted the unbiblical view of complete abstinence from alcohol. As though alcohol in itself was sinful or evil. If this were to be true, then we would have some serious concerns about Jesus' actions when on earth³. And seeing that Jesus never sinned, you have two options; either immediately deny that alcohol is inherently sinful or have some serious exegetical gymnastics ahead of you. The trouble for people who would hold this view continues with the notion that "everything created by God is good" mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:1-5:

Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.

We have already noted the major statement, "everything created by God is good", but note also the use of "foods" as a specific example. I hope by this point you clearly see the error of teetotalism. But to be clear, avoiding something to be safe is very different from claiming that it is sinful. There are still problems with both views, though, specifically when it comes to alcohol. I'll touch more on that later, but for now, let's take a step back and look at the ground we're standing on (or what's left of it).

Corrupt Foundation

Remember Jesus's parable in Matthew 7:24-27 about the wise man who built his house on the rock and the fool who built his on sand? Your position on this issue is just like that. You must have a firm foundation, otherwise whatever you built on top will fall. This is why *sola Scriptura* matters so much. Even if you personally don't hold to teetotalism, it was still the original reason that churches started using grape juice. Everything from there on was built upon that belief. The tower, that is using grape juice for the cup, is built on a foundation that is anti Biblical. It isn't grounded in truth, so this tower must fall.

But could you rebuild the same tower on a different foundation? On the only sound foundation who is Jesus, the Truth (John 14:6) and the Word (John 1:1). Is there any biblical defense to switch from wine to grape juice? These questions will be answered in the next section, though I am convinced they aren't the right questions. Or rather, these questions will often come with a wrong intention. We then are pursuing a defense for the position rather than letting the Bible dictate what we believe from the start. I digress though. Let's dive into the Word.

Biblical

The Institution of the Cup

Perhaps the best place to start is at the Passover, where Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. It was indeed a Passover meal where this took place (Luke 22:7-20). I say this to point out that wine was the

³ Examples: John 2:10-11, Luke 7:33-34, Matthew 26:27

common use for the cup during Passover. But we need not use extra-Biblical sources in this instance because of the latter half of 1 Corinthians 11. In these verses, Paul corrects the Corinthian church because of their behavior when taking the Lord's Supper. In doing so, Paul makes it clear that it must have been alcoholic wine that they were using. Here is 1 Corinthians 11:20-22: (Underlining added)

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

It is obvious that this wasn't grape juice being used here. (If it wasn't already clear by the fact, there was no way to keep it from fermenting until 1869.) And to clarify, Paul is not condemning the use of wine at the Lord's Supper. He is stating that because of their wicked actions, in their intent and proportions, the Lord's Supper was not being practiced. There was no inward practice of remembrance and confession. There couldn't have been! They were sinning as they were attempting to partake. In the following verses where Paul makes the correcting remarks that are often read before the partaking of the elements (1 Cor. 11:23-26). He nowhere corrects their use of wine. Now let's resume the Passover meal in Matthew's account (Matthew 26:26-29):

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he 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."

Freedom in the Cup?

Many have read the above verses and concluded that there is a freedom to use either wine or grape juice. While I don't agree with that conclusion, I would much rather people stop there. Many have gone further, without Biblical basis, and presume that what is used for either element is not of much concern. That as long as you have the right heart, you could easily use water for the cup. In that case, maybe we should use Oreos and milk? I hope you find that unsettling. To be sure, there is a difference between using grape juice rather than milk. Most clearly because one is from a "fruit of the vine" as seen in Matt. 26:29. So in that regard it fits the requirement, no?

Well, it gets a little more complicated from there. First, let us not miss the "this" prior to "fruit of the vine". As we saw earlier, it was certainly wine used at the Lord's Supper. Therefore, it would be specifically referencing wine. I admit the depth of this argument can be debated. Though, if keep step with that thought process, the following statement, or perhaps thesis, can be formulated. Who are we to change what Christ Himself instituted? Even further, we do it lacking any clear biblical basis. No matter how "slight" you believe the change to be, this is a tragedy! Please keep this in mind as we look to glean more from verse 29.

The Wedding Feast

Matthew 26:29 is a rabbit hole that deserves its own book, but I shall try to keep this brief. Even though we've looked closely at the first few words, we have neglected the meaning of the whole verse. Here it is as a refresher: "*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.*" It has been previously thought that this is talking about a wedding feast. Particularly a wedding feast between Christ and the Church. I find

myself personally agreeing with this view, though I have yet to go any further than the foothills of such a beautiful concept. This notion seems to me to run very deep into Scripture. In both the old and new testaments, we can find examples. Perhaps Jesus' first miracle is a foreshadowing of the feast (John 2:1-11). And you should be able to see the connection in Isaiah 25:6-8:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Wine in the Bible

I say this all to point out something peculiar about wine. It is a symbol used many times throughout the Bible. Further than its use for the Passover and the Lord's Supper. It's used as a symbol of man's joy (Ps. 104:15), as a symbol of wealth (Pr. 3:10), and even cheers God (Jdg. 9:13) perhaps because of its use as a drink offering (Lev. 23:13). It is also clearly a symbol of God's wrath (Jer. 25:15). Which connects back to the Lord's Supper where we remember Jesus taking the cup of God's wrath. But isn't wine represented negatively in the Bible as well?

Yes, that is exactly what we see in verses like Proverbs 20:1 and Ephesians 5:18. But often times it is because of associated drunkenness. There are many things that are glorious when practiced correctly, but heinous when not. Think of intimacy within the bonds of marriage—glorious. But intimacy outside of marriage is wretched. It is the same with wine. Furthermore, take note the ratio of positive and negative references of wine in Scripture.

According to an analysis by Brad Whittington in his book *What Would Jesus Drink*, there are 247 references to alcohol in Scripture. He divided them into 3 types of references; Negative (40), Positive (145), and Neutral (62). Not only does the positive outweigh the negative, it beats the other two combined, 145-102. Though this is helpful data, we should try to stay diligent. I would personally suggest you read through some of the references to get a better feel for the Scripture's insight on wine. Anyone with access to a phone or computer can easily search wine in their favorite Bible app or software to get a list of verses to read. If that seems too difficult, perhaps an internet search will help. Either way, I urge you to read it directly from the Bible.

I hope that this section on God's Word was sufficient to convince you of my position. That is to show you the Biblical reasons that support using wine for the Lord's Supper. There may be some of you that see the arguments I have given and can only agree to an extent. That is in part, because of the difficult task of living this out. How can I now practically apply this? How will it work for former alcoholics? Should we abandon it all in favor of the safety of the flock? Or perhaps we can offer both wine and grape juice? The next section will be answering these questions.

Practical

Former Alcoholics

It might at first seem easy to switch to wine, but there is an elephant in the room. The elephant being people who have previously struggled with alcohol. What if someone specifically refuses to take wine because they have a longstanding abstinence of all alcohol? Before you continue reading, I

suggest you read Romans 14. While you read it, think of how it affects our situation. Does it overthrow the whole concept of being scrupulous about this certain topic?

I don't believe so. In fact, there are many points where it might help. Consider verse 14, where Paul shares the same sentiment as he did in 1 Timothy 4:1-5. There is also the sentiment to not cause a brother to sin found throughout the entire chapter. Anyone, especially any elder, needs to think about this greatly before they decide to change to wine. There needs to be a mighty concern that you do not put a stumbling block before your brothers. With that in mind, we can now tackle some of our questions.

Disease or Sin?

There has long been a wrong view of alcoholism in our culture. This can easily be traced back to the temperance movement. Whether it started with teetotalism or just spread like wildfire after, we now face a widespread problem. Much of our culture sees alcoholism as a disease, not sin. To see it as sin means we see it as something defeated at the cross. You do not have to live in fear of something God created to be good. It is like avoiding intimacy in marriage because you were a fornicator in your youth. Some of you might even deny this comparison because of the complete absurdity of it.

We also do not substitute the bread for former gluttons. I want to assure you that in the power of Christ, you can beat the sin. You are a new person in Christ. There can be a different discussion for people that are in the process of recovering from alcoholism. Though I do suppose you do not, or should not, get married while you still struggle with sexual sin. But I am not talking about them right now. I want my brothers and sisters to be able to freely take the Lord's Supper, just as Jesus instituted.

As far as the actual implications of what I've been saying, I think it best to only offer wine. Jesus only instituted one drink, not two. One might argue that it is even better to offer just grape juice rather than both. Either way, I think it is best to offer only one cup. If we really want to be scrupulous, we could mix our wine with water. That was indeed the common practice at the time, even mentioned throughout the Bible (Pr. 9:2). Maybe you'll think it best to get non-alcoholic wine. (No, it is not just grape juice because it is still fermented.) Personally, I am a proponent of mixed wine, as the alcohol seems to in some way be a reason for its many symbols in the Bible.

Conclusion

I hope I have provided useful insight into this subject. In closing, I want to remind my readers of the consequences of alcohol. Drunkenness is a dangerous sin. We must not only listen to the Bible's freedom in wine, but also heed its warnings. Perhaps the best place to read this in Proverbs 23. Specifically verses 30 onward. Let us rejoice in God's good creation while also being diligent.

Sola Deo Gloria!