

Using Wine in Communion

Why use wine in communion? The consumption of wine is a topic of some debate, particularly so in American churches. There are some Christians who abstain from wine or alcohol altogether, and this might be done for various reasons—some abstaining for medical or dietary concerns, and others from ethical convictions. Given this, why would a church choose to use wine in communion, or consider changing from grape juice to wine?

Biblical

There are some good biblical reasons for Christians to be thoughtful with matters concerning wine. For one thing, Christians should recognize that drunkenness is a sin, which means that the *abuse* of wine is something to be guarded against.¹ Sin twists things, even when those things are good otherwise. In fact, in one of the earliest examples of Christian fellowship and communion, Paul writes to the Corinthian church to rebuke them (among other things) for getting drunk when they gathered together.² So, overindulging on wine is not good, and we are warned accordingly.

Wine, and particularly drunkenness on wine, is even sometimes used in Scripture as a sort of image of judgment, because it depicts what it looks like when sin twists a good thing. The wine is good, but those under the sway of sin twist it and make it into an object of wrath instead of blessing. So instead of good wine flowing from the cup as a blessing, sin makes the cup flow over with wrath in its place. Similarly, when Christ described his redemptive work on the cross, he described it as drinking from a cup that was given to Him by the Father.³ That cup of wrath is a poignant picture of something meant for celebration that has been twisted into something of judgement instead.

However, the overall picture of wine in Scripture is not that it is primarily a curse or object of wrath—on the contrary, wine is very often pictured as a sign of God's blessing! Consider how wine is spoken about in Scripture:

- Wine is the Lord's blessing that makes men's hearts glad (Ps 104:15 and Zech 10:7)
- Wine cheers both God and men (Judges 9:13)
- Wine gladdens the heart of man (Ps 104:15) and gladdens all of life (Ecc 10:19)
- We are to drink wine with a merry heart before the Lord (Ecc 9:7)
- Wine drips from the mountaintops in the day of the Lord's blessing (Joel 3:18)
- Feasts of aged wine surround the mountain of the Lord for us (Isa 25:6)
- There is outcry from the people when the gladness of wine is absent (Isa 24:11)
- An abundance of wine represents God's blessing on a people (Gen 27:28; Deut 7:13; 11:14; 32:14; 33:28; Isa 25:6; 62:8–9; Jer 31:11–14; Hos 2:8; 2:21–22; 14:7; Hag 2:19; Psa 104:14–15; Prov 3:9–10; Eccl 9:7–9; Joel 2:19, 24; 3:18; Amos 9:14; Zech 9:16–17)

¹ Deut 21:18–21; Rom 13:13; 1 Cor 6:9–10; Eph 5:18; also Prov. 20:1.

² 1 Cor 11:17–22.

³ Matt 26:39, Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42. Similar uses: Isa 51:17–22; Jer 25:15–29; 48:16; 49:12; 51:7; Ezek 23:32–34; Zech 12:2; Ps 60:3; 75:8; Rev 14:9–11; 16:11 (see *LBD*).

- The absence or destruction of wine signifies God's disfavor on a people (Deut 28:39, 51; Isa 24:7, 11; Hos 2:9; 9:2; Joel 1:1, 5; Amos 5:11; Zeph 1:13; Hag 1:11; 2:15–16)
- Wine is a blessing of the Lord's covenant to his people—it is a covenant drink (Deut 14:23)

Wine was often used in the feasts and celebrations of Israel, because it was a sign of God's blessing and provision, something that accompanies celebration and joy. Wine is a *covenant drink*—it brings blessing to God's children and a curse upon covenant breakers.

It's particularly helpful here to consider why Christ included wine in the first Communion (after all, our topic is wine-in-communion, so we should look carefully to how it was first instituted). Consider the circumstances of Christ's first miracle, which was changing water to wine at the Wedding at Cana (John 2). Of all the wonders to do, why did Christ choose to make water into wine as his initial public miracle? He did so because it was the start of a celebration—one that would not be consummated until his people drink from that cup with him again in the kingdom (Matt 26:29). It is fitting that Christ's first miracle involved wine, because it foreshadowed the covenant meal He would later institute with His disciples.

Later, during the Passover in his final week, Christ offered up the bread and the wine with his disciples, and he gave them (and us) the command to partake of that bread and wine until he returns, which is something that we should seek to obey with conviction. Communion is different than the celebrations of the world—it is *strange*, in the way that the things of heaven are often wonderfully *strange*. And until that final day, Christians drink that cup of wine in obedient remembrance of Christ, like an ongoing wedding celebration that awaits the final wedding feast of the Lamb (Luke 22:18).

So, rather than dismissing the need for wine in communion, consider this picture that communion paints for us:

- Christ changed water into wine as his first earthly miracle, and he did so in the context of a wedding feast (John 2)
- Christ inaugurated the New Covenant (itself a marriage, see Eph 5:32) with his disciples by lifting up the bread and the wine as a blessing
- Christ commanded the Church to take bread and wine through Communion until his return, like a bride expectantly waiting for her groom (2 Cor 11:2)
- Christ declared that he is going to prepare a place for his bride (John 14:2-3), and that he would not drink that cup of wine until that wedding feast was complete (Matt 26:29)
- Christ will one day return to drink the cup of covenant with his bride, the Church (Rev 19:7-9; 21:2; Matt 26:29; 25:1; John 3:29)

Wine is the celebration drink that Christ sets aside for his covenant bride. The darkness will try to twist this blessing (as some did when they accused Peter and company of being drunk at the first Christian sermon), and Christians must surely be on guard against the abuses of our own flesh (1 Cor 11:27-30). But we can remember that Christ lifted up a cup that he had blessed and commanded us to drink it until he comes (1 Cor 11:25-26), and we should seek to follow his commands closely and faithfully.

We should take the cup with joy and celebration, but also with seriousness. Christ tells us how he is to be worshipped, and he lifted the cup and instructed us to do likewise in remembrance of him (1 Cor 11:25). So the Christian task, however strange, is always to carefully and faithfully worship as we have been shown. As we seek to remain tethered and anchored to Scripture in our worship, we should recognize the *ordinary* place that wine has in communion.

Historical

Drinking wine in communion may seem like something *new* to some Christians, but that is not actually the case. In fact, drinking wine in communion has been the historic practice of the Christian church for century after century... until very recently. The novelty is actually the substitution of grape juice in our communion *instead* of wine, which is something that would have been quite unusual for the majority of Christians history. In fact, early Christian sources (such as the Didache and writings of Justin Martyr) affirm the normative use of wine that was established quite early in the Church's practice.

However, grape juice became especially popular in American churches within the last 150 years, to the point that it is now seen as the *standard* element for communion (as opposed to it being the exception). In 1869, a Methodist and staunch supporter of the temperance movement named Dr. Thomas Bramwell Welch developed a pasteurization process to prevent grape juice from fermenting (fermentation naturally occurs after grapes leave the vine). This was a pivotal development for communion in many churches, as it allowed grape juice to be preserved without fermentation as wine. This new pasteurization method developed during a particularly advantageous time period, just as the wider temperance movement in the United States reached its peak of influence in Western culture. Subsequently, the practice of substituting wine with grape juice became popular in a great many Protestant churches, and the trend only continued to grow through the later Prohibition era of the 1920s.

Many faithful churches have subsequently used grape juice through the years, and that practice is not necessarily wrong or sinful. Nor should we conclude that those Christians who abstain from wine for various reasons are lesser Christians for taking that exception. But even though the element itself is not magical, it is still important, precisely because it is a means of God's grace to us.⁴ In other words, the elements that we use actually matter.⁵ God's commands set the order of our worship, and God promises to bless our observance through those means.

It is also best to think of this as an issue of an *exception*, not a *circumstance* or issue of *conscience*. In our tradition, a *circumstance* is something in worship that is ordered according to wisdom and prudence (WCF 1.6)—things like service times or projector use. But those are different than the *elements* that involve our approach to God and response to his Scripture—things like word, sacrament, and prayer. That is why we are not free to use any element we choose for the sacraments, including in communion (for example, coke and pretzels should not be considered an option).⁶ Those who may have medical or ethical concerns about wine would simply be taking an *exception* to the rule, and it is quite fitting that grape juice be included as a suitable substitute (as a form of "fruit of the vine").

⁴ Called "real presence." See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4 chapter 17.

⁵ Consider the example of Uzzah in 2 Sam 6, or Nadab and Abihu in Lev 10:1-3.

⁶ A real-life example, not hyperbole.

Denominational

Though individual churches and presbyteries within our denomination can-and-will make their own decisions on these matters, the Westminster Standards⁷ clarify that the recommended and normative elements to be used in communion are bread and wine (WCF 29.3; WLC 168; WSC 96). All three of our subscriptional standards call for bread and wine, which has long been the common presbyterian and reformed practice. The elements are not mundane or carnal, and our confession affirms that there is a true spiritual weight to them that gives us reason to consider what elements are being used:

Worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements, in this sacrament, do then also, inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive, and feed upon, Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then, not corporally or carnally, in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet, as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses. (WCF 29.7)

Someone may take an exception for various reasons (as noted), yet the exceptions do not undermine the standard.⁸ Whenever possible, bread and wine are to be preferred, and this is an important emphasis for us to preserve as a confessionally reformed congregation.

One final reason that wine should be preferred in Communion is that it is in keeping with the Regulative Principle of Worship. Simply put, the regulative principle is our affirmation that our worship is ordered by God's command:

But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture. (WCF 21.1)

We remember that when Christ instituted Communion, he did so with bread and wine, and he then served us those elements and commanded us to do likewise. Quite simply, bread and wine are the elements that Christ chose to use and command us to do likewise! This belief means that we obey by using the elements we have been given, and we resist excluding them from our common worship. Including grape juice for those who take exception to our confessional standards is a helpful accommodation, while wine and bread remain as the ordinary elements of communion.

Additional Note on Bread

The sacrament of communion makes use of two elements: the bread and the cup. The use of bread is typically the less controversial of the two elements by far, though it is worth noting that bread is preferable to any substitute (e.g. crackers). Further, the use of unleavened

⁷ These three documents (Westminster Confession, Westminster Larger Catechism, Westminster Shorter Catechism) form our binding Standards, while the *Directory for the Worship of God* is included as a non-binding portion.

⁸ In the same way, an alternative to bread may be considered for someone with a wheat intolerance, but it is still preferable to use bread when possible.

(un-yeasted) bread most closely resembles the bread that was offered by Christ in the institution of the first communion.⁹

⁹ Unleavened bread being that used at Passover; see Exod 12:15–20; 23:15; cf. Matt 26:17–29; Mark 14:12–25; Luke 22:7–23.