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Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology

The Fruit of the Vine in the Sacrament of the Altar

The classic definition of the Lord's Supper was given by Luther: "It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself." Luther cites Matthew (26:26-29), Mark (14:22-25), Luke (22:15-20), and the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:23-29) as Scriptural proof for the institution, nature, and meaning of the Sacrament of the Altar.

In recent years some have raised the question whether grape juice might be substituted for wine in the Sacrament in view of the fact that the texts do not expressly state "wine," but "fruit of the vine" or "cup." The reasoning is that grape juice should be an allowable substitute for wine in sacramental use, since grape juice can rightly be termed "fruit of the vine."

The Scriptural texts leave no doubt that Christ was celebrating the Passover meal with His disciples. Among the foodstuffs on the table would have been unleavened bread and wine. As regards the latter, it was without question the fermented product of the grape vine, in view of the fact that this was the spring of the year, probably April. Moreover, wine was the customary drink of the Jews at solemn festival meals, the *peri haggaphen* (liturgical Hebrew for "fruit of the vine"). There can be no doubt then, as Lenski points out, that *this* fruit of the vine" — with emphasis on the *this* — which the Passover cup contained "shuts out any and all other products of the vine save actual wine and thwarts all modern efforts that speak of unfermented grape juice, raisin tea, or diluted grape syrup" (*Commentary on Matthew*, p. 1028). The point is that "fruit of the vine" is a technical term which in the stated contexts can have no other meaning than *wine*. The church has never, from that day forward, felt at liberty to alter the solemn testament given by Christ in conjunction with the bread and the wine of the Sacrament (cf. Matt. 28:20; Gal. 3:15). Whenever such altering or substitution was introduced, it was promptly repudiated, lest any doubt be cast upon the validity of the sacrament as Christ instituted it.

In an article dealing with the "Archaeology of the Sacraments" (*CTM*, X (1939), p. 328), P. E. Kretzmann avers: "There never

was any doubt in the minds of the teachers of the Church as to the meaning of the expression [fruit of the vine]. For this reason they resented the use of any substitute for wine." The consensus is virtually unbroken. The chief quibble seems to have been whether water was to be added to the wine. This Jewish custom was followed later in the Roman church, on the grounds that this action symbolized the uniting of the people with Christ in the priest's celebration of the Mass and on the fact that blood and water flowed from the side of the crucified Christ.

The Lutheran Confessions stand as a phalanx behind Luther's simple and beautifully clear definition in the Small Catechism, "under . . . the *wine*." There is not a single concession, nor any implication, that anything else was ever to be substituted or understood for "wine." The Small and Large Catechisms enjoy the support on this point of the Augsburg Confession (Article X), the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Article X), the Smalcald Articles (III, vi), and the brilliant exposition and defense of the Lord's Supper in the Formula of Concord and its Epitome (Article VII). There is total concurrence that in the Lord's Supper Christ "offers His disciples natural bread and natural wine" (FC VII, 64). Countless other references in the Confessions attest the same fact.

Luther's many writings on the Sacrament of the Altar also bespeak the same consistency of usage. There was no substitute for wine in the Sacrament. For Luther, of course, Christ's precious gift of His true body and blood in the Sacrament was the pre-eminent thing, but never apart from the stated bread and wine. He advised those who had doubts or misgivings about receiving both kinds in the Sacrament to forego reception for the time being. That they could do without sinning (St. L. 22, 1862; 21a, 608). He noted, too, that the Sacramentarians, for all their wild notions concerning the meaning of the Sacrament, were at least agreed on one point, viz., that the bread was bread, and the wine, wine (St. L. 20, 1773). While he considered it an adiaphoron whether water was mixed with the wine, Luther's personal emphasis was on natural wine, without additional diluting or mixing with water (St. L. 19, 258). Luther noted that the Scriptures did not specify whether the wine should be red or white (though it was to be of or from the grape vine), nor whether the bread was to be of wheat or barley flour or another grain (St. L. 20, 188). These matters were adiaphora, as were also the quantity and shape of the host or bread, manner of distribution, and other externals or usages connected therewith.

Sometime during the winter of 1542-43 Luther was asked whether a sick person, wishing to have the Sacrament but unable because of nausea to use wine, could be given something else in place of the wine. According to Kaspar Heydenreich, who recorded the conversation, Luther replied (WA 74, TR 5, 5509; emphasis added.):

The question has often been put to me; but I have always responded as follows: *Nothing else but wine should be used.* If wine cannot be taken, then let the matter rest that way, in order that nothing new is done or introduced. *Must* a person who is dying receive the sacrament yet? In times past it was said that he who received the one kind might consider himself to have partaken of both kinds. Why do we not rather say: If you receive nothing, consider yourself to have received both?

Clearly Luther rejected *any* idea of substitution for the *materia terrestris*. Hence the barbed *reductio ad absurdum* above, suggesting that then a person take or receive nothing and just simply believe that he has received something.

Luther's stance, as also that of the Confessions, is upheld by *all* Lutheran theologians. (Cf. Baier-Walther, *Compendium*, p. 498; N. Hunnius, *Epitome*, p. 208; F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* 3, p. 354; T. Engelder, *Popular Symbolics*, p. 93; J. T. Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 525; Ad. Hoenecke, *Dogmatik* 4, p. 115; E. Hove, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 340f; et al.) Martin Chemnitz, the Lutheran church's greatest theologian in the generation after Luther, wrote definitively of the Sacrament of the Altar in his *Enchiridion*, in his famous *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, and in his beautiful *De Coena Sacra*. As with Luther there is no question in Chemnitz's mind as to the prescribed elements, bread and wine; Holy Scripture clearly teaches them.

Nor ought the question be raised for dispute in our day. Those who do so, that is, argue that "fruit of the vine" should also allow for the use of grape juice, processed or unprocessed, are clearly making this suggestion for other reasons than on Scriptural grounds. The idea of insinuating or substituting grape juice (or something else) for wine is of sectarian background, stemming specifically from religious bodies which pledge total abstinence from all liquids that have alcoholic content.

There is no ground for the notion that the use of wine in the Lord's Supper contributes to alcoholism or even threatens the so-called alcoholic. The sin of drunkenness, like adultery, homosexuality, etc., is clearly exposed in Scripture as serious (1 Cor. 6:10); but the source of the evil in each such case of sin is man's own depraved, evil heart. Even though some may argue on

scientific grounds that certain individuals are naturally and constitutionally more inclined to alcoholism, for example, than others, this still would not remove the onus of sin. By virtue of his sinful nature man is prone to all manner of sin, but Scripture nowhere allows us to teach that man is, as it were, biologically programmed by God to *be* so and so. This would virtually remove from man the responsibility for his sin and place it on God, something totally repugnant to Scriptural teaching. We may be sure that Christ, who knew perfectly what was in man (John 2:25), would not have instituted anything, including the Lord's Supper and the use of wine, if it in *any* way would contribute to man's delinquency. The Apostle Paul's pastoral practice also underscores this fact (1 Cor. 11). The wine in the Lord's Supper threatens no sinner who comes in repentance and faith, but consoles and lifts him up with the precious gift of the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins and gives him strength for godly living. This is the only teaching Scripture supports.

Those who simply "prefer" to receive grape juice instead of wine should be led to see that their "preference" is in violation of Scripture's own clear teaching and that they are thereby making the Sacrament an uncertain matter, if in fact not invalid. Moreover, it is to be feared that such tampering with the Sacrament may in the final analysis involve a deeper error, the relegating of the Lord's Supper to a mere memorial meal instead of the blessed means of grace that Christ has constituted it to be for our spiritual well-being, for the forgiveness of sins.

Any substitution for the Scripturally stated elements is especially offensive because it yields to the intrusion of Reformed theology and practice into the Lutheran church. It is to be expected that those who hold the Lord's Supper to be a symbolical eating and drinking will have little difficulty substituting other elements for the bread and wine. This has been true in some Reformed circles. Needless to say, the *strength*, or alcoholic *content* of the wine, is not the issue, as long as natural grape wine is used. This, therefore, rules out some bizarre concoctions, or mixtures, which are sometimes sold as wine, such as grape juice mixed with alcoholic spirits distilled from grain.

We strongly urge, therefore, lest confusion be multiplied, offense be given, consciences and peace within the church be disturbed, that Lutheran pastors and people continue a consistent practice in support of the Scripturally designated elements in Holy Communion, especially as regards the use of wine, "the fruit of the vine," which Christ instituted when He gave to His church this new testament in His blood.