

# **The Lord's Supper, with Specific Emphasis on the Visible Elements Used**

*by Paul G. Eckert*

[Presented to the Metropolitan South Pastoral Conference, Meeting at Jordan Ev. Lutheran Church, West Allis, Wisconsin, September 16, 1991]

Questions have been raised with regard to the use of grape juice in place of wine in the Lord's Supper in certain situations. Is it correct to do this? Is it wise to do this? Is it necessary do this?

This presentation intends to glue background and answers. It is not intended to be an exhaustive presentation, but hopefully will serve to elicit discussion and to encourage one-mindedness in our midst.

## **I. The Lord's Supper—No Questions**

The Lord's Supper is not a human custom or tradition. It was instituted by our Lord the night before He was crucified.

With the visible elements Christ truly gives us His body and His blood when we eat and drink in this precious meal.

The Lord's Supper clearly proclaims that Jesus gave His body and shed His blood for the forgiveness of our sins.

Participating in the Lord's Supper shows our unity with Christ, gives evidence of our oneness as members of His body, and confesses His death until He comes again.

## **II. The Lord's Supper—Some Questions**

Is grape juice permitted in place of grape wine? That is the specific question that led up to this paper.

A related question would be whether bread with yeast may be used in place of unleavened bread.

With regard to wine or grape juice, the background for that in the past seems to have come more from circles opposed to alcoholic beverages.

The background at the present time seems to come more from those concerned for people who fear any use of alcoholic beverages.

## **III. Some Answers**

What has been said with regard to the question especially of grape juice or wine? I would like to quote from various sources.

The June 20, 1975, issue of *Christianity Today* has an article entitled, "Wine-Drinking In New Testament Times." In answer to the question whether the word "wine" in the New Testament means grape juice the author says, "Well, my answers are no and yes. No, the wine of the Bible was not unfermented grape juice. Yes, it was different from the wine of today." He then goes on to point out from various ancient sources and also from the 1901 *Jewish Encyclopedia* that wine was indeed wine, but wine mixed with two or three parts of water. From the *Jewish Encyclopedia's* reference to what was used at the Passover he goes on to say, "From this we can conclude with a fair degree of certainty that the fruit of the vine used at the institution of the Lord's Supper was a mixture of three parts water to one part wine."

For a contrary opinion as to wine or grape juice, an opinion based on logic and not on historical evidence, the book *Seventh Day Adventists Believe* says (p. 200): "The Passover bread Jesus ate was unleavened, and the fruit of the vine unfermented. Leaven (yeast), which produces fermentation that causes

bread to rise, was considered a symbol of sin (1 Cor. 5:7,8), so it was unfit to represent the Lamb ‘without blemish and without spot’ (1 Peter 1:19). Only unleavened or ‘unfermented’ bread could symbolize the sinless body of Christ. Likewise only the unspoiled fruit of the vine—the unfermented wine—appropriately symbolizes the spotless perfection of the cleansing blood of the Saviour.” This quote also gives a reference stating that it is unwarranted to say that because of the time of the year it was not possible to have unfermented grape juice available at the time of institution.

But the question in our midst is not whether only grape juice is correct, but whether grape juice is allowable. So let us hear more quotations.

*The Lutheran Liturgy*, by Luther D. Reed, quotes (p. 30) Justin Martyr of the second century as speaking of bread and wine mixed with water, and speaks (p. 34) of Cyprian of the third century as also referring to a mixed chalice, the mingling of water with the wine.

*What Luther Says*, by Ewald Plass, in paragraph 2479 has the following: “But what should one do, someone asked the Doctor one day, if for some reason a person cannot take wine? May some other element be used instead? Luther is reported to have answered as follows: ‘This question has often been put before me, but I have always replied that one must take nothing but wine. However, if a man cannot bear to use wine, then let the matter rest, so that no novelty be made or introduced.’” Note: in the St. Louis edition of *Luther’s Works*, VIII, 1605, 109, Luther refers to “*Wasser, welches auf dem Altar in den Wein gegossen wird,*” even as Justin and Cyprian referred to wine mixed with water.

What do the Lutheran confessions say? I checked my *Concordance to the Book of Concord* in vain for any references to unfermented grape juice. I did not reread all references in the confessions, and thus I may well have missed something. But spot checking showed reference only to bread and wine, with mention of nothing else. Obviously the use of grape juice was not an issue because wine was taken for granted. There is a reference (*Triglotta*, p. 375) to Epiphanius of the fourth century complaining that the heretic Encratites “abstained from wine even in the Lord’s Supper.” I assume the conclusion can be drawn that grape juice was not substituted or considered an option, rather they abstained. On page 989 it says: “For since Christ gives this command [concerning eating His body, etc.] at the table and at supper, there is indeed no doubt that He speaks of real, natural bread and of natural wine, ...”

Let’s go on to the dogmaticians.

Francis Pieper, in his *Christian Dogmatics*, says (III, pp. 353-354): “As water and the application of water are a part of Baptism, so bread and wine and their reception are the earthly element of the Lord’s Supper. As we do not venture to substitute some other fluid for water in Baptism, so neither in the Lord’s Supper do we dare to substitute aught for bread and wine.” In a footnote he goes on: “At the institution of His Supper Christ used bread (ἄρτος), Matt. 26:26, etc. In the cup at the first celebration was wine, as we see from τὸ γένημα τῆς ἀμπέλου, Matt.26:29, etc. No detailed specifications as to the sort of bread and wine are given. This, therefore, is a matter of free choice. Walther (*Pastorale*, 168f.), following the older theologians writes:

It is unessential whether the bread is leavened or unleavened, whether it be baked of rye, wheat, corn, barley, or oats, whether it have this or that shape, provided that it is real bread baked of flour and water. It is likewise unessential whether red or white wine be used, or whether the wine be undiluted (merum) or mixed with water (as was likely used by Christ, to accordance with the custom of His time), provided that what is used is a potion made from “the fruit of the vine (γένημα τῆς ἀμπέλου),” Matt.26:29. The pastor must use every care that nothing but true wine is used in the Sacrament. . . . I order not to introduce an element of uncertainty into the Sacrament, one should refrain from using grape juice, since it is doubtful whether it is still “the fruit of the vine” after having undergone the pasteurizing process.

Adolf Hoenecke, in his *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, says (IV, pp. 115-116):

*Was die materia terrestris betrifft, so ist gleichgueltig, von welchem Getreide das Brot ist. Die scholastische Behauptung, dasz kein Abendmahl sei ohne Brot aus Weizen, ist ohne allen Grund. Lutherischer Grundsatz ist: Qualitaet (gesaeuert, ungesaeuert), Quantitaet, Gestalt sind Adiaphora.... Was den Wein betrifft, so ist nach der Sitte in Israel sehr wahrscheinlich, dasz der Herr gemischten Wein brauchte. Aber gewisz bleibt, dasz auch dies, ob reiner oder mit Wasser vermischter Wein gebraucht ward, adiaphoristisch ist. Dasz in der lutherischen Kirche dennoch der Gebrauch reinen Weins Sitte ward, dazu wirkte sehr mit die papistische Kontroverse, dasz gemischter Wein notwendig sei.*

In short: it makes no difference from what grain the bread is made, or whether it is leavened or unleavened; likewise it is an adiaphoron whether the wine is mixed with water or not.

Perhaps here is the place to insert some remarks from commentaries.

R.C.H. Lenski speaks very pointedly in his Matthew commentary, p. 1028:

The cup contained wine mingled with water, on which all are agreed save those who for special reasons believe that wine was not used. When Matthew 26:29 writes, “of this fruit of the vine,” i.e., that which the Passover cup contained, he 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. The expression “fruit of the vine” is derived from the Hebrew *pheri hagiphen*, a choice liturgical formula for wine. The matter is of utmost importance and lies beyond our powers to alter. To alter a testament is to invalidate that document. Hence the use of any other liquid than actual wine that is made from grapes—this alone was “wine” in Christ’s day, this alone was used in the Passover—renders the sacrament invalid so that it ceases to be the sacrament. Christ’s testament is valid only in the form in which he made it and not as men today may alter it.

Paul E. Kretzmann’s commentary on Matthew, pp. 146-147, says:

As for the contents of the cup, all attempts to interpret the expression “fruit of the vine” as though any product of the grapevine might be used, fresh grape-juice, unfermented grape-juice, grape-brandy, and other modern products, they cannot stand without a denial of the text. For if rules of exegesis apply at all, there cannot be the slightest doubt that the expression as it was used by Christ on the evening of the institution referred to the intoxicating wine of the Passover; for the expression “fruit of the vine” was the technical term of the Jews for the wine of the Passover.

In *The Wenzel Commentary* on the Gospels, p. 646 states: “The fruit of the vine, γένημα τῆς ἀμπέλου (grape vine) is, of course, wine, and not grape juice. Though at the time of the grape harvest the Jews may have drunk some grape juice, at this season of the year (the beginning of spring) they had nothing but wine, the method of conserving grape juice not being known among the Jews.” On p. 652 he says: “In the celebration of the Lord’s Supper it is advisable, though not absolutely necessary, to use the same kind of bread in order to conform as closely as possible to the first institution.... Needless to say, it is immaterial what kind of flour is used to prepare the bread, as long as the result is bread.”

Werner Franzmann, in his *Bible History Commentary—New Testament*, says in a note on p. 756 of Volume 1:

Is unleavened bread obligatory?—The answer is No. Jesus gives no prescription as to what kind of bread is to be used in the sacrament. Yet the church has done well in following the custom of

using unleavened bread. It serves to recall the first Lord's Supper and the words of Jesus, which make our eating and drinking a Means of Grace.

With regard to wine, however, he does not seem to raise any question as to whether something else could be used. On p. 764 he says:

The cups used in this ceremonial drinking contained grape wine. It was diluted with water, ordinarily in the proportion of two parts of water and one part of wine. Therefore, the "cup" stands for its contents, wine. We know that the source of the wine was grapes, for right after administering the cup, Jesus said, "I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). Therefore the use of wine made from berries or anything other than grapes is not allowable.

We can list other sources and their comments.

*The Abiding Word*, II, pp. 372-374, says unleavened bread cannot be demanded as necessary, but of the wine says, "Throughout the history of our Church the Sacrament has been celebrated with grape wine upon its altars, and the fathers of our Synod have warned specifically against the use of grape juice, lest any uncertainty arise as to the validity of the Sacrament."

J. Schaller, in his *Pastorale* on p. 45, says the type of bread is a matter of liberty. With regard to the wine he says, "Grape juice, *wie man es jetzt haben kann, ist ebenfalls Gewaechs des Weinstocks, so dass gegen dessen Gebrauch im Notfalle nichts Triftiges eingewandt werden koennte.*" While approving of grape juice, however, he cautions against it because of the wrong message it could give the Prohibitionists.

John H.C. Fritz, in his *Pastoral Theology*, speaks in a similar way on pp. 122-123, with regard to the wine saying this:

It is with some a moot question whether the mere juice of the grape, which has not yet undergone the process of fermentation, may be used. There is no doubt, however, that the Lord used wine when He instituted the Lord's Supper and that the practice of our Lutheran Church in using only wine in administering the Sacrament should be continued. Only by doing so will every Christian have the absolute assurance that he is receiving that Sacrament which the Lord Himself instituted.

*The Shepherd Under Christ* on p. 90 echoes the above comments. We can quote these words:

Since the term used for the contents of the cup is "fruit of the vine," the use of unfermented grape juice in case of an emergency cannot be considered invalid. Nevertheless, the church will avoid all doubt on the part of its members by using fermented fruit of the vine and may at times do so also as a confessional action over against anyone who claims that the use of any alcoholic beverage is sin.

Reference to these words from *The Shepherd Under Christ* is made in a 1986 letter response sent out by a faculty subcommittee from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. With permission I have attached a copy of that letter at the end of this presentation.

#### **IV. An Answer From The Passover?**

We have quoted many people. What about the Old Testament? Does it give us an answer? Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in connection with the Old Testament Passover meal. There is no question that unleavened bread was used in the Passover and that Jesus used such bread in the Lord's Supper institution.

There likewise seems to be no question (except for a earlier quote from the SDA) that wine was used as a part of the Passover meal. It is interesting to note, however, that no reference is found in the Old Testament as to any beverage and the Passover. This was obviously not essential, as the bread and the lamb were.

Would Deuteronomy 29:5-6 indicate that no wine was used? It says that during the 90 year wandering “you ate no bread and drank no wine or other fermented drink.” What about the Passover and wine, which is a fermented drink? The answer would seem to be found in Joshua 5:1-10. Reference to celebrating the Passover is found in Numbers 9:1-14 after the first year, and then again in Joshua 5:10 after crossing the Jordan. Deuteronomy 16:1ff. speaks of observing the Passover, but perhaps there was no celebrating of the Passover during the wandering years, even as there was no circumcision. Both of these apparently were restarted after crossing the Jordan.

Regardless of whether it was celebrated or not, wine is not mentioned as a required part of the Passover. And finally, whether wine was used or not, whether unleavened bread was used or not (here there is no question), all of this would be a part of the Old Testament ceremonial law from which we are free. We do not look here for our answers. The answers we seek must come from the institution of the Lord’s Supper, what Jesus used then, and what Scripture makes clear to us.

### **V. What Is The New Testament’s Answer?**

We are told a number of things that Jesus did without telling us that we must do them. He broke the bread. He gave it to His disciples. He took a cup. He offered it to them. But breaking bread, handing it to someone or having him take it, using a certain size cup or cups, giving this to someone or having him take it—here we have no specific commands, even as we have none as to the size or shape of the bread or the quantity or color of the wine.

But there are some things that are specific. We are to eat and to drink, and we are to use visible elements with the Word. The visible elements are identified as bread and as fruit of the vine.

The bread that Jesus used was unleavened. What was in the cup was wine. Yet it is true that Jesus says bread, and not unleavened bread; fruit of the vine, and not wine. If we are to be guided by Scripture alone, then we must say no more and no less than Scripture permits us to say.

Since R.C.H. Lenski, in the reference quoted earlier in this paper, makes quite a point of “this fruit of the vine” as speaking clearly from Scripture, I could add a comment here. It would seem to me that his reference to “this” in Matthew may not be as restrictive as he makes it, since it appears possible to me that the “this” simply emphasizes the fruit of the vine, or could also point to a special meal use of the fruit of the vine and not necessarily to the type of fruit of the vine. To be noted is that Mark and Luke use “the” and not “this.” There are quite a few references in Scripture to fruit of the vineyard. Examples might be Deuteronomy 22:9; 2 Kings 19:29; Isaiah 37:30, 65:21; Luke 20:10. “Fruit” always means what we understand by that word: the product or result of the vine, without becoming more specific.

As a person may question the emphasis Lenski places on “this,” so we may well also question Francis Pieper’s reference to the results of the pasteurizing process. I doubt that this latter reference would raise any doubts or concerns today. But it is possible that Lenski’s comments on “this” would raise serious doubts for some as to whether grape juice should be used.

### **VI. What Should Our Practice Be?**

We heard quotations from many sources in the first part of this presentation. Do we pick the one that supports our feelings? Do we tally up totals and see which position has the majority on its side? That was not the intention of the quotations. They simply showed that all kinds of things have been said on this subject. It is not surprising, then, that questions are raised today too.

What do we do? What should our practice be? We want to distribute the Lord’s Supper according to His institution. There is no question that bread and fruit of the vine were used. There is no question that this bread

was unleavened bread and that the cup contained wine. Let us stay with that about which there can be no questions.

This may need to be done also as a matter of confession over against those who wrongfully reject the use of wine, or those who see the Lord's Supper not as a sacrament but as something that can be changed to suit man's thinking.

But what about concern for the person who fears the use of any alcoholic beverage? My practice has always been to tell anyone, whether alcoholic or not, not to come to the Lord's Supper if he thinks of "getting a drink" when he comes. Let him wait until he comes for what the Lord's Supper is. But what of the recovering alcoholic? We need to remember that the Lord's Supper is not a part of Jesus' words in Mark 16. He says, "Believes and is baptized." He does not add anything about the Lord's Supper at this point. The alcoholic's problem, like other problems in life, may make it properly impossible or inadvisable to partake of the Lord's Supper. In such cases the person's conscience should not be burdened for missing the Lord's Supper, as little as he should feel that he is being deprived of the assurance of forgiveness. Here Dr. Martin Luther's words quoted earlier fit in well: "If a man cannot bear to use wine, then let the matter rest, so that no novelty be made or introduced."

There is another solution not to be overlooked, and that is to offer to dilute the wine. It is quite clear that wine was mixed with water. Instead of going to grape juice about which there are questions, I would much rather use wine mixed with water about which there need be no questions. Perhaps the person who fears any contact with an alcoholic beverage could also be strengthened by the fact that the Lord's Supper is never spoken of as harming the person who uses it correctly. Scripture speaks of it as a source of judgment only to the person who misuses it, not to the one who comes in faith for its consolation.

And what about the use of leavened bread or grape juice? Scripture uses only the words "bread" and "fruit of the vine." There is no question that unleavened bread is "bread" and that grape wine is "fruit of the vine." They are correct. They were used by Jesus. About them there can be no question.

Leavened bread, however, is also "bread," and grape juice is also "fruit of the vine." Can their possible use then be completely excluded? I believe not. Let us be careful, then, not let our feelings pass judgment if some in special cases, with proper instruction, feel the need to use fruit of the vine in unfermented form.

But can leavened bread and grape juice raise questions? Could they cause some to have uncertainty? The request for this presentation is proof that they can. Let our practice, then, stick with what cannot be questioned, instead of advocating that which raised many questions.

## **VII. Let The Emphasis Stay Where It Belongs**

Yes, look at the visible elements to be used according to our Lord's institution. Let Scripture give us our certainty.

But don't let the Lord's Supper become just some kind of academic exercise. And don't let the nature of the bread and of the fruit of the vine detract from the mystery of grace that in this meal we receive Christ's true body and true blood and the assurance that He died so that forgiveness might be proclaimed to us sinners.

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- Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Faculty Subcommittee letter, 1986.

**Addenda: WLS Faculty Subcommittee Letter.**

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November 19, 1986

Pastor

Dear Pastor:

This is to response to your letter (n.d.) to President Panning in which you raised a question about a statement in *The Shepherd Under Christ* that permits the use of grape juice in the Sacrament. The undersigned were asked to respond to your question.

You refer to the sentence in *The Shepherd Under Christ* in which, as you wrote, "the exegetical determination *seems* to be made that 'fruit of the vine' is a generic term and therefore can include unfermented grape juice." Then you ask: "Is this really the judgment here or is that a casual statement that slipped in?"

Perhaps it would be good to look at that entire paragraph:

The other element is simply called the “cup” in the various accounts of the institution. That the content of the cup was wine is again a matter of historical knowledge, although no reference in Scripture to this element ever uses the word *oinos*. The Lord does refer to it as the “fruit of the vine” (Mt 26:29). The church has therefore very properly insisted on *grape* wine. Wine made from any other fruit should not be used. Since the term used for the contents of the cup is “fruit of the vine,” the use of unfermented grape juice in case of an emergency cannot be considered invalid. Nevertheless, the church will avoid all doubt on the part of its members by using fermented fruit of the vine and may at times do so also as a confessional action over against anyone who claims that the use of any alcoholic beverage is sin.

You will note that a number of points are made:

1. That the content of the “cup” Jesus used was without a doubt wine (undoubtedly diluted with water as was the custom of the day);
2. That *oinos*, the specific word for wine, is not used in any of the institution accounts;
3. That the term “fruit of the vine” is used in Mt 26:29 and that therefore we are not free to use any other kind of wine than grape wine;
4. That the term “fruit of the vine” does not exclude grape juice;
5. That in case of emergency, therefore, the use of grape juice does not invalidate the Sacrament;
6. That, to avoid any doubt and at times as a confessional action, the church will use *fermented* fruit of the vine.

It is clear from the above, of course., as you also readily acknowledge in your letter, that *The Shepherd Under Christ* is not advocating the use of grape juice, but rather *allowing* for its use under extraordinary circumstances. Such a practice is consistent with the historical practice of the WELS. In Schaller’s *Pastorale Praxis* (p. 45), for example, it states:

*Grape juice, wie man es jetzt haben kann, ist ebenfalls Gewaechs des Weinstocks, so dass gegen dessen Gebrauch im Notfalle nichts Triftiges eingewandt werden koennte* (Grape juice, such as is now available, is likewise fruit of the vine, so that nothing cogent can be said against its use in case of necessity).

In his *Dogmatics*, Prof. J.P. Merger raises the question, “Is the term ‘fruit of the vine’ broad enough to cover grape juice?” He does not answer that question in writing. One of the undersigned (Prof. Gawrisch), however, has recorded in his Seminary notes Prof. Meyer’s answer: “‘Fruit of the vine’ is broad enough to include grape juice.”

Pieper’s *Dogmatics* also, by the way, does not absolutely rule out the use of grape juice. That Pieper recognizes that the fruit of the vine can be grape juice is seen in his concern that *pasteurized* grape juice might no longer be the fruit of the vine (Vol. III, p. 354), a needless concern, it appears. Just as pasteurized milk remains milk, so pasteurized grape juices remains grape juice. His point, as is true also of *The Shepherd Under Christ*, is that wine should be used lest we cause doubts to arise.

On what basis are statements such as the above made? They are based on this principle: Only what the Scriptures *specifically* require can be said to be something that is *essential*. In this particular situation, if the Scriptures had said *oinos*, then wine must be used. But since the Scriptures simply speak of “the cup” and then define the content of the cup as “fruit (*geneema*, “offspring,” “product”) of the vine,” then wine cannot be insisted upon as being *essential* to the Sacrament.

We can draw a parallel with the bread. We know that unleavened bread was used the first time the Sacrament was offered. In the words of institution, however, *unleavened* bread is not specifically mentioned,



but rather simply “bread.” We are therefore free to use bread in either its leavened or unleavened form: but, since Jesus certainly used unleavened bread, we will use it also unless extraordinary circumstances would require the use of leavened bread.

So with the cup. We know that grape wine was used the first time the Sacrament was offered. In the words of institution, however, “wine” is not specifically mentioned, but rather simply “the cup,” described as the fruit of the vine.” We are therefore free to use the fruit of the vine in either its *fermented* or *unfermented* form; but, since Jesus certainly used grape wine, we will use it also, yet without excluding the possibility, under extraordinary circumstances, of using grape juice.

As to Lenski’s statement that “*this* fruit of the vine” must be referring to wine and that therefore wine *must* be used, we offer the same response. There is no doubt that “*this* fruit of the vine,” i.e., what Jesus’ disciples had just drunk, was wine, mixed, no doubt, with water. But such a statement is not saying, “Wine (*oinos*) is essential to the Sacrament.” It is the fruit of the vine that is specifically mentioned and which is therefore essential if it is to be a valid Sacrament.

We can draw another parallel with the bread. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, the Apostle Paul repeats the words of institution. Then, in v. 26, he says, “Whenever you eat this (*touton*) bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” “This bread,” referring to the bread Jesus used to the Sacrament, was without a doubt unleavened bread. But since the Scriptures do not make unleavened bread a specific requirement, but simply say “bread,” we therefore do not have to be conscience-bound to use only unleavened bread.

You realize, of course, that we are in no way *advocating* the use of grape juice in the Sacrament. We are simply *allowing* that which God’s Word allows; although the circumstances when grape juice might be used would be few and far between, e.g., possibly with an alcoholic, although not necessarily even then. Many alcoholics have no trouble receiving the wine in Holy Communion. One who is very hesitant to receive wine, however, because he fears the effects of even a small amount of alcohol, should not on that account be deprived of the Lord’s Supper since it is the fruit of the vine, not wine, that is essential to the Sacrament.

We hope that this has helped to answer your question in a satisfactory manner. We are sending a copy of this letter, as you requested, to Pastors.

WLS Faculty Subcommittee,

David J. Valleskey, chrm.  
 Wilbert R. Gawrisch  
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