

Fruit of the Vine

John D. Schuetze

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When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he referred to the contents of the cup as "fruit of the vine." We know that wine was used in the Passover cups, and often it was mixed with water. But is the use of fermented wine required by Scripture? Or does the fact that Scripture does not call the contents of the cup "wine" but "fruit of the vine" allow some flexibility?

With the term "fruit of the vine," Jesus is using a formal and solemn phrase taken from the thanksgiving prayer in the Passover liturgy. According to the Babylonian Talmud the prayer offered over wine began, "Blessed are you, our God, King of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine."¹ Other similar phrases appear in the liturgical prayers that are used when blessing other culinary items for the various Jewish festivals. When blessing vegetables the prayer reads, "fruit of the earth," for herbs and spices, "fruit of the ground," and for tree-grown fruits, "fruit of the tree."² What is striking when we consider all these terms is that they seem to denote the earthly source of some of God's blessings rather than specific terms for specific items.

There are some who say that the phrase, "fruit of the vine," was always used and understood in Hebrew culture as a reference to wine. There is little doubt that in the context of the Passover meal this was true, for as we mentioned above, the "fruit of the vine" that was used for that occasion was wine. But can we say that a Jewish person always thought of wine when he or she heard the term, "fruit of the vine?" When this author asked a cross section of 21st-century Jewish rabbis, "What is meant by the term 'fruit of the vine,' the response was 'grapes' or 'products of the grape vine.' The Talmud would seem to support this broader understanding of the term. In speaking about Nazirites, it states, "Keep off, we say to a Nazirite; go round the vineyard and come not near it!" and then points out that this is to be done "as a precautionary measure to avoid the possibility of breaking the law which forbids the fruit of the vine to a Nazirite."³ It seems unlikely that the only concern here was that the Nazirite would be tempted to drink some wine.

This leads us to another section in Scripture which would seem to shed some light on this subject and make us wonder whether the term "fruit of the vine" can be restricted to "wine." With the Nazirite vow the fruits of the vine are treated as a unit. It is true that the Nazirite was to abstain from all alcoholic drinks. Yet he was also to avoid all products of the grape vine.⁴ In view of this it would seem that the phrase "fruit of the vine" has a broader application than just fermented wine. In one Jewish seder haggadah which commemorates the New Year for the Trees (*Tu B'Shvat*) the term "fruit of the vine" is used for both wine and raisins.⁵

Some take the *τουτου* (this fruit of the vine) in Matthew 26:29 as proof that Jesus was referring to the specific "fruit of the vine" that was found in the Passover cup, i.e., wine.⁶ Yet Luke's account would seem to argue against this. He places Jesus' reference to the "fruit of the vine" at the drinking of the cup that preceded the institution of the Lord's Supper. In Luke's account Jesus also adds, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of

¹ http://www.come-and-hear.com/berakoth/berakoth_35.html

² http://www.come-and-hear.com/berakoth/berakoth_35.html

³ http://www.come-and-hear.com/zarah/zarah_58.html

⁴ Numbers 6:1-4 reads, "If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite, he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins."

⁵ See: <http://www.akhlah.com/holidays/tubshvat/seder/hagaddah.php>. While the seder liturgy dates back to the 16th century, the actual festival is ancient and is mentioned in the Talmud. See <http://www.coejl.org/tubshvat/celebrate/tubshabag.pdf>

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski (*The Interpretation of Matthew*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943) writes, "Matthew writes not merely 'fruit of the vine,' *pheri hagiphen*, the lovely liturgical term for wine used in the Passover ritual, but most definitely 'this fruit of the vine,' the one regularly used in the Passover and thus used by the Lord also for his Supper" (p 1032).

God” (Luke 22:15,16). This would seem to indicate that Jesus is speaking of the bread and the cup in a collective sense,⁷ as a reference to the entire Passover celebration. Jesus was seeing the Passover and the Lord’s Supper which he then instituted, as the beginning of that which would culminate in heaven-the wedding supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19). To say that Jesus was vowing to abstain from wine for the duration of his life here on earth misses the context of his comments.⁸

There are also those who appeal to the practice of the early church which used wine and not grape juice for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Yet church history also reveals: that it was common practice to use leavened bread in the sacrament.⁹ To say that Jesus’ words restrict the contents of the cup but not the contents of the paten would seem to be inconsistent. In defense of the “wine only” approach to the contents of the cup, some point to Luther who said that “nothing else but wine should be used.”¹⁰ They also add that “the Lutheran Confessions stand as a phalanx behind Luther.”¹¹ Yet nowhere in the Lutheran Confessions does it say that only wine should be used, and that the use of unfermented wine or grape juice invalidates the sacrament.¹² The repeated references to wine in the Confessions are not designed to confess that this is the only acceptable form of “fruit of the vine” that Scripture permits in the Lord’s Supper. The Confessions are mentioning the material element that was routinely found in the sacramental cup at that time (and which should be routinely used today also). So one is hardly violating a *quia* subscription of the Lutheran Confessions by considering whether a nonalcoholic wine or grape juice is valid in the sacrament. The signers were not seeking to confess how they understood the term “fruit of the vine.” Their frequent reference to wine in the Lord’s Supper does not establish that this, and only this, is what can be used in the sacrament. That is something we need to derive from Scripture (*norma normans*).

One thing that has often turned this subject into an emotional debate is the Temperance Movement of the 1800s and its continued influence on a segment of Christianity.¹³ The very production of pasteurized grape juice has its roots in this movement which eventually demanded grape juice as a necessary substitution for wine in the Lord’s Supper.¹⁴ There are still those today who feel that to offer wine in the Lord’s Supper would be a violation of what they see as a biblical mandate to avoid all alcoholic beverages.¹⁵ As a matter of confession it

⁷ This would make Jesus’ use of the term “fruit of the vine” in the Lord’s Supper a synecdoche. This does not mean that the term “fruit of the vine” does not help us identify the contents of the cup. It simply means that the emphasis of the word “this” refers to the entire Passover/Lord’s Supper celebration and not just the type of fruit of the vine that happened to be in the cup.

⁸ This is the view which is suggested by R. C. H. Lenski (*The Interpretation of St. Matthew*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, p 1031, 1032), Craig L. Blomberg (*The New American Commentary: Matthew*, Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992, p 391), and Donald A. Hagner (*Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Press, 1995, p 774). In contrast R. T. France (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, p 995) states, “The strong negative *ou me*, ‘I will never,’ is used to underline the certainty of Jesus’ vision of what is to come; it is overexegesis to find in it a vow of abstinence to account for Jesus’ refusal of wine on the cross (27:34).”

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), Vol II, p 239.

¹⁰ *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, “Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology: The Fruit of the Vine in the Sacrament of the Altar,” Vol 45, no 1-2, Ja-Apr 1981, p 79.

¹¹ *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, “Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology: The Fruit of the Vine in the Sacrament of the Altar,” p 78.

¹² In the article, “Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology: The Fruit of the Vine in the Sacrament of the Altar,” the author concludes, “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” (p 80). Likewise in their book, *Pastoral Theology*, contributing editors Norbert H. Mueller and George Kraus state, “Nonalcoholic grape juice, a pasteurized product of the nineteenth century, is not referred to in the institution of Christ, and its use in the sacrament raises a question whether the words of Christ have been followed or, not” (p 97).

¹³ See Betty A. O’Brien, “The Fruit of the Vine: The Cup of the Lord or the Cup of Devils.” *Methodist History*, Vol 31, no 4, July 1993, p 203-223. The first part of the paper deals with the history of the Temperance Movement.

¹⁴ Thomas B. Welch (1825-1903), a Methodist minister, physician, and dentist, developed the pasteurization process for grape juice. He did this so that his church would not have to use fermented wine in the Lord’s Supper.

¹⁵ For example, note the following statement from The United Methodist Book of Worship: “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.”

may be necessary to use fermented wine in the Lord's Supper. Yet we have to be careful not to go too far in reacting to those who believe that the consumption of anything with alcohol is a sin.

What makes this discussion more than just an academic exercise is that it affects the pastoral care of souls. There are those who may have a psychological or physical aversion to alcohol. A person who is recovering from alcoholism could fall into this category. While some people who are recovering from alcoholism say that a sip of fermented wine in the context of the Lord's Supper does not affect them, others say that it does.¹⁶ Our goal is to help people focus their attention on the blessings of the sacrament, especially the forgiveness of sins. If the use of nonalcoholic wine or grape juice for that specific individual allows that person to focus on the meaning of the sacrament rather than on the material elements, such an action would seem to be expedient, given that the term "fruit of the vine" would seem to allow such a practice.

The other individual that is affected is the one whose body physically reacts to alcohol, either because of an allergy or because of the use of medication. Partaking of the bread only and avoiding the cup would not be a wise practice. But by allowing the person to receive the "fruit of the vine" in a nonalcoholic form would allow such a person to enjoy the benefits of the Lord's Supper, without violating the Lord's institution.

In conclusion, what should be the contents of the cup in the Lord's Supper? Since it has been the practice of the Lutheran church, as well as the Christian church for most of its existence, to use wine in the Lord's Supper, there seems to be no compelling reason to change that practice. As a general practice it would be wise to continue using fermented grape wine when celebrating the Lord's Supper. Changing to grape juice or nonalcoholic wine for all communicants would move away from the historic and biblical precedent. Allowing communicants to choose one form of the "fruit of the vine" over against another (wine vs. nonalcoholic wine) without a compelling reason would seem to focus undue attention on the material elements. However, when there is a need for nonalcoholic wine or grape juice, the term "fruit of the vine" would allow us to accommodate such a person without putting the validity of the sacrament in doubt. The very fact that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers to call the content of the cup "fruit of the vine" and not "wine" would demonstrate that such an application would be faithful stewardship of the mysteries of God,¹⁷ including the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

¹⁶ John Howard Shahr, "I Smell the Cup: The Problem of Alcoholics and Communion Wine," *Christian Century*, March 12, 1975, p 257-259.

¹⁷ The author is not using the term "mystery" here as a specific reference to the sacraments, but to that which we would not know without the revelation of God. The means of grace, including the sacraments, would fall into this category.