FRUIT OF WHICH VINE?

When it comes to the practice of Holy Communion many churches use grape juice as opposed to wine. Is the blood of Christ given through grape juice as it is wine? For those who believe Communion symbolizes something, this is not an issue for symbols are shadows which deliver nothing. However, should you rightly confess from Scripture that Holy Communion delivers the gifts of Good Friday to us, namely the body and blood of our crucified and risen Lord, then the question becomes acute: does grape juice contain and deliver the forgiving blood of Christ just as wine does?

It is always good to begin with the Catechism which nicely teaches that the phrase, “fruit of the vine” means wine, and nothing else:

289. What are the visible elements in the Sacrament?

The visible elements are bread and wine.

935. **Matt. 26:26-27** Jesus took bread … Then He took the cup.

*Note*: “The fruit of the vine” (Luke 22:18) in the Bible means wine, not grape juice. See also **1 Cor. 11:21**.

Grape juice was commercially developed circa 1890 when Thomas Bramwell Welch developed unfermented wine now commercially marketed and sold as grape juice. Prior to that date grape juice was never commercially produced for the mold that grows on the skin of the grapes is toxic to humans. Yes, a vintner and many of us have eaten grapes picked off vines but this is all-together different from commercial mass-production.

An avowed teetotaler who believed wine to be inherently sinful Welch made it his goal to develop a non-fermented drink for Communion. In 1890 Thomas Welch applied Louis Pasteur’s technique of pasteurization upon wine for the purpose of arresting the fermentation process. Welch and his Reformed friends must think that Jesus “sinned,” when he used wine—but that is another discussion.

The term, “fruit of the vine” is a technical term which means simply, “wine.” It is akin to the phrase, “the twelve,” being a technical term for the apostles, not a numerical head count of those who had gathered. Jesus loved all his disciples. But when the Scriptures speak of the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” (Jn 13:23; 19:26, passim) this is a technical term to specify St. John. When our Lord instituted the Lord’s Supper at the Passover gathering he used wine. This is still the drink used by Jews to this day who celebrate the Passover.

Here in the Upper Mid-West we have technical terms as well. When you attend a party and ask for “cold one,” you would be disappointed if the host brought you a Pepsi and not a beer. Should you use the technical term, “barley pop,” for a drink you would be perplexed if handed a Root Beer. In certain geographic regions and cultural gatherings these are technical terms for a specific drink and not mere descriptions of a beverage. To do so would show one was seriously blind to the zeitgeist, the “spirit of the age,” and the cultural setting.

To those who say that “fruit of the vine,” is not a technical term for wine the possibilities then far surpass mere grape juice. If “fruit of the vine,” is to be understood as an agricultural description and not a technical term then according to my count there are eight (8) possibilities and why should anyone settle simply for “grape juice”? Fruit of the vine would include:

1. Grapes
2. Watermelon
3. Cantaloupe
4. Squash
5. Tomato
6. Strawberries
7. Pumpkins
8. Muskmelon
9. Zucchini
10. Cucumbers

Through the power of spoken word in the Words of Institution Jesus places his sin forgiving blood in wine, and only in wine. To change the element(s) is to do more than deviate from being “right,” and veering into “error,” which is no doubt what happens. The gift of forgiveness is bypassed and the person has drunk only grape juice, or any of the ten other possibilities listed above.

In order to have a marriage you need specific elements—male and female—and anything that changes these elements such as two women or two men is not a marriage in God’s eyes. In similar manner to have Holy Communion one needs the elements to which Jesus has promised to attach his life giving blood. As will be shown shortly our Lutherans *Confessions* clearly, and to our modern ears, audaciously, make the claim that when one changes the elements which Jesus has prescribed—such as substituting grape juice for wine—one does not have the sacrament.

When Jesus said, “this do,” he meant using bread and **wine** in addition to the Words of Institution and the act of distribution. These two elements also are contained in his command, “do this” (Lk 22:19). This is what our Lutheran Confessors teach in the Lutheran *Confessions* and which I confess as well. But do not listen to me. Listen to what all pastors swear to teach at their Ordination vows. From the *Book of Concord* we read:

Christ’s command “This do” must be observed unseparated and inviolate. (This embraces the entire action or administration in this Sacrament. In an assembly of Christians bread and **wine** are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, drunk, and the Lord’s death is shown forth at the same time.) St. Paul also places before our eyes this entire action of the breaking of bread or of distribution and reception (1 Corinthians 10:16).[[1]](#footnote-1)

As an earthly marriage is negated when the elements of a man and a woman are changed from Christ’s institution in the Garden of Eden so too is the Lord’s Supper negated when the elements are changed. In the original context of the above quote the Confessors are addressing the Corpus Christi processions which still happen in Roman cultures and countries. The Confessors say the Sacrament ceases to be the Sacrament when the use instituted by Christ is not fulfilled; be it either the Corpus Christi procession, or in today’s context by changing which elements are used. The principle enunciated by the Confessors is still applicable:

To preserve this true Christian doctrine about the Holy Supper, … the following useful rule and standard has been derived from the words of institution: Nothing has the nature of a Sacrament apart from the use instituted by Christ or apart from the action divinely instituted. This means, if Christ’s institution is not kept as He appointed it, then there is no Sacrament. … The use or action here does not mean chiefly faith. Nor does it mean the oral participation alone. It means the entire external, visible action of the Lord’s Supper instituted by Christ: the consecration, or words of institution, the distribution and reception, or oral partaking of the consecrated bread and **wine**, of Christ’s body and blood. Apart from this use, it is to be regarded as no Sacrament…. [[2]](#footnote-2)

Without ambiguity we read: “If Christ’s institution is not kept as He appointed it, then there is no Sacrament.” The *Confessions* explain that Christ’s institution—the “use” and “action” Jesus has instituted—encompass three criteria: 1) the words of institution, 2) distribution and reception, 3) as well as the elements of bread and wine wherein Jesus promises to place his body and blood. And then the *Confessions* state that should we depart from this use, which among the items listed includes using wine, we have no sacrament. We depart from the “use” or “action” prescribed by Jesus when we no longer have “bread” and “wine.”

This article is offered not to be “right” or prove others “wrong.” It is offered to deliver comfort and forgiveness to people based on the Lord Jesus’ command and promise. Our faith, sincerity, and action do not make the Sacrament. What creates the Sacrament is when we receive what Christ has commanded and promised as we speak the Words of Institution over bread and wine. The certainty of following our Lord’s loving promise and not our own rationalist ideas is what comforts sinners and brings forgiveness.

Due to the fall people suffer in all sorts of manner; allergies, alcoholic issues, etc. A nice solution which preserves Christ’s mandate found in the Words of Institution and in the elements to be used is as follows. I instruct the Altar Guild to fill an individual communion cup with water and then place one or two drops of wine within which significantly dilutes the wine—but wine is still the element used! Sensitivity to personal issues is considered and faithfulness to Christ’s words is observed which enables people who know their need to receive the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

In Christ,

- **Pastor Weber**

1. “Solid Declaration, The Holy Supper,” in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd edition, gen. ed., Paul T. McCain (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005): 575:84. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Solid Declaration, Article VII, The Holy Supper,” in *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd edition, gen. ed., Paul T. McCain (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005): 575-576:85-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)