

Ask the Pastor: The Use of wine and not grape juice in the Lord's Supper

Question

Why does the Lutheran Church insist on using wine and not grape juice in the distribution of the Lord's blood in the Lord's Supper? Does it make a difference?

Answer

During Christ's institution of the Lord's Supper, Mt 26, Mk 14, and Lk 22, the Lord gave to His disciples unleavened bread and what is called 'the cup'. The meal was the Passover meal, as Jesus Himself says, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." Luke 22:15. According to Exodus 12, during the Passover feast, the Jews would have eaten specific food. But only unleavened bread and 'the cup' were given to the disciples with the words, 'Take eat, take drink, for the forgiveness of sins.' 'The cup' referred to wine, not grape juice. The Jews would have used wine, which is not forbidden by God, as some claim. 'The fruit of the vine', wine, is what the Lord instituted, and according to His institution is the Lord's Supper properly maintained.

Seesemann, in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, who wrote an article on 'wine', though the word wine does not appear in any of the Gospels concerning the Lord's Supper, writes, "according to custom Jesus was proffering wine in the cup over which He pronounced the blessing; this may be seen especially from the solemn 'fruit of the vine' (Mk 14:25 and par.) which Jesus borrowed from Judaism. (TDNT, p164).

Also, Lenski, in His commentary on St. Luke, writes, "When Matthew 26:29 writes, 'of the 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 - 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." (Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel, p1028).

Edward W. A. Koehler, in Luther's Small Catechism, Annotated, writes, "As to the content of the cup we learn that it was the 'fruit of the vine' (Luke 22:18), and from history we know that wine was used at the Passover, and at the Lord's Supper in the early church (1 Cor. 11:21). Hence we use wine, and we have no reason nor authority to substitute anything else." (p293).

In regard to the insistence of the Lutheran Church and others on using wine and not grape juice, this is only good, right, and salutary, for the use of grape juice in the distribution was not instituted by God, does not agree with historical Christian practice, nor does it encourage anything but doubt and vex consciences as to whether the true sacrament of our Lord is received.

As to the Lord's institution of wine, one will only deny this if one doesn't follow the text as it's worded and follows the reasoning of man rather than the institution of God. But some will say that grape juice was instituted instead of wine. In this case, one must question the argument for using juice. More than likely, one who encourages grape juice to be used will also disbelieve in the 'Real Presence' of Christ in the Lord's Supper and/or deny the Christian's freedom to drink alcohol. The burden of proof remains on they who part from Christ's institution. In order to preserve what the Lord has given for our benefit, we must keep it as the Lord has given it and not change or alter it as errant man sees fit.

Historically, the church throughout all ages has accepted the use of wine in the distribution. Though this does not validate a practice as God-given, it does point out the commonality of the practice, which was undisputed among orthodox Christians, until some who departed from true orthodoxy began to question it's use. The use of wine in the Catholic church, for example, does indicate an adherence to the divine institution of wine in the Lord's Supper, though other wrong practices have crept in. It was the use of grape juice that was the 'new invention' in the church, not the use of wine.

To sum up what has been said, Lutherans and others use wine because that's what the Lord instituted in the Lord's Supper. The use of anything other than wine brings doubt as to the validity of the Sacrament, for what the Lord has not given cannot assure consciences or remove doubt. We have no authority to add to or subtract from what our Lord has given. Others use grape juice or other drink (i.e. tea, milk, etc.) and insist on their use and not wine because they fail to recognize the significance of Christ's institution and what it is that the Lord gives and offers in the sacred meal of the Lord's Supper, namely, Himself, His own body and blood, 'in, with, and under' the bread and the wine, for the forgiveness of sins.