

The Use of Wine in the Lord's Supper

When it comes to the consumption of alcohol we tread upon a hotly debated subject that often generates more heat than light. Regardless of where one falls on this issue, due to the nature of the debate many have allowed it to affect the practice of the Church. In particular, many, perhaps if not most, American churches do not use wine in the Lord's Supper; they instead use grape juice. This practice should cause us to ask two questions. What does the Bible say about alcohol? In particular, what does the Bible say about wine? And, second, should we use grape juice or wine in the Lord's Supper? Let us proceed to answer these questions.

The Bible does not condemn wine or alcohol, nor does the Bible declare them to be inherently evil. On the contrary, the Bible speaks of good things and blessings connected to wine. For example, God provides "wine that makes glad the heart of man" just as He gives "bread which strengthens man's heart" (Psa. 104.15). God promises His obedient people that He will bless them with an abundance of wine (Deut. 7.13, 11.14; Prov. 3.10). He also threatens to withdraw this blessing if His people disobey His law (Deut. 28.51; Isa 62.8). Now, there are those, however, who argue that while all of this may be true, the Israelites made their wine much less potent than the wine that we consume—in effect, they made grape juice. This was necessitated by the fact that good water was in limited supply.

The Bible, however, draws no distinction between wine and grape juice or between fermented and unfermented wine. The same wine that made Noah (Gen. 9.21), Lot (Gen. 19.32-35), Nabal (1 Sam. 25.37), Anaseurus (Est. 1.7, 10), and others drunk, was given to Abraham by Melchizedek (Gen. 14.18), kept in the storehouses of the kings of Israel (1 Chr. 27.27; 2. Chr. 11.11; Neh. 5.18), and permitted to all God's people (Deut. 14.26). Moreover, our Lord provided the guests at the wedding at Cana with wine (John 2.1ff). We must keep in mind that drunkenness is condemned by the Word of God (1 Cor. 5.11, 6.10; Eph. 5.18; Gal. 5.21), but we must recognize that alcohol, or wine, is not the cause of such sin. Rather, man's sinful heart is at the radix of drunkenness. This is what the Bible has to say about alcohol and in particular, wine. What about the Lord's Supper?

The Last Supper was instituted with wine, not grape juice. Jesus spoke of "the cup" as filled with "the fruit of the vine" (Matt. 26.29; et al.). Even in the face of drunkenness at the Lord's Supper Paul did not condemn the use of wine but rather its abuse (1 Cor. 11.21-22). In fact, grape juice was not used in the sacrament until its invention in the 19th century by Thomas B. Welch, founder of Welch's Grape Juice. While grape juice is nice, should we not follow Christ rather than Mr. Welch? We must be faithful to the example, and essentially command, of Christ. We have no authority to change a divinely instituted practice of worship

For these reasons the session of Geneva has determined that we will begin to use wine instead of grape juice in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We will begin this practice when we observe the Lord's Supper in September.