

PASTORAL THEOLOGY BRIEF: The Material Elements in the Lord's Supper— Hermeneutics and Practice

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Within our fellowship it has been the practice to let the biblical accounts determine what can and cannot be used for the material elements in the Lord's Supper. This careful study of Scripture had led us to conclude that we can use any kind of bread, with or without yeast and made from any type of grain. It also holds that the term "fruit of the vine" allows us to use diluted or non-diluted grape wine, as well as non-alcoholic grape wine or grape juice in Holy Communion in exceptional circumstances. Nearly four decades ago *The Shepherd Under Christ* had this to say about the material elements in the Lord's Supper:

It is a matter of Christian liberty whether the bread is made of wheat of some other grain, whether it is leavened or not, whether it is shaped in a loaf or a wafer.¹

The other element is simply called the "cup" in the various accounts of the institution. That the content of the cup was wine is 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 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.²

The position of *The Shepherd Under Christ* was not a new practice in our circles. It affirmed what John Schaller advised a century ago in his *Pastorale Praxis*:

Grape juice, as we now are able to have it, is still fruit of the vine, so that we cannot consider its use in the case of an emergency to be invalid.³

¹Schuetze, Armin W. and Irwin J. Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974, p. 92.

²Ibid.

³"Grape juice, wie man es jetzt haben kann, ist ebenfalls Gewächs des Weinstocks, so dass gegen dessen Gebrauch im Notfalle nicht ohne Triftiges eingewandt werden könnte." (John Schaller, *Pastorale Praxis*, Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1913, p. 45).

In recent years some within our circles have questioned whether the term "fruit of the vine" allows for the use of anything except wine. Usually the arguments in favor of a more restrictive view have centered on two areas: hermeneutics and practice. This pastoral theology brief will address each of these in order.

How we understand the term "fruit of the vine" is a matter of biblical hermeneutics. Certainly historical practice plays a part in determining what specific material elements we regularly use in the Lord's Supper, and we will speak to that point when we discuss wise pastoral practice. But our first task is to apply consistent principles of biblical interpretation. The hermeneutical principle that speaks to this matter is this: We do not make a definition or term more restrictive than what the Holy Spirit inspired unless there is a compelling reason to do so. The Holy Spirit inspired the term "fruit of the vine." That is what he uses to describe the contents of the cup. He nowhere uses the more restrictive word "wine." We know from history that the content of the cup that Jesus used at the Last Supper was wine, probably mixed with water. That is why the Christian church in general and the Lutheran church in particular have historically used wine as the material element in the cup. But as far as Scripture is concerned—and Scripture is the *norma normans*—the term "fruit of the vine" is the only one that is used to describe the contents of the cup. From history we can establish that this "fruit of the vine" comes from a grape vine. We cannot establish with certainty that it always referred to a fermented liquid product of the grape vine. For this reason, within our fellowship we have refrained from binding consciences where Scripture does not bind them. It is the Holy Spirit not the church's practice that determines the contents of the cup. It is God who inspired the term, "fruit of the vine" and not the word "wine."

But just because "fruit of the vine" allows for the use of non-alcoholic wine or grape juice in the Lord's Supper, does this mean we are free as Lutheran pastors to choose whatever we want as we administer this sacrament, provided it is fruit of the vine? This is where the matter of orthopraxy comes in. It is the opinion of this author that this is where we often struggle in pastoral ministry. Many of us are deeply concerned about maintaining orthodoxy in our midst. "God's Word is Our Great Heritage" is often sung in our circles. We preach God's "free and faithful grace" and teach the Word "in all its truth and purity." And indeed we should. But what strikes this author is that while we understand what it means to have orthodoxy in our doctrine, we don't always understand what it means to have orthopraxy in our practice. Too often we carry out our practice under the banner of Christian freedom, or perhaps we should say, under an abuse of the banner of Christian freedom. We reason, "If I am free to

do something, then I can do it. And no one who is orthodox should question what I do.”

Let's apply this to the Lord's Supper. Scripture allows us to use a non-alcoholic wine or grape juice in the Lord's Supper in exceptional circumstances. That is something we can support with sound exegesis of the biblical text. However, orthopraxy is not only shaped by the biblical text, but by a number of other factors, such as historical practice in the church, present practice in our fellowship, and the setting in which I serve. Historically the Christian church has used wine in the Lord's Supper. This is what Jesus used. This is what the historic Christian church has used. This is what the Lutheran church has used. Orthopraxy means that in regular circumstances we will also use wine unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise. Orthopraxy means that we do not draw undue attention to the material elements in the Lord's Supper, as offering a variety of choices (fermented wine, unfermented wine, or grape juice) to all communicants would do. Orthopraxy means we do not introduce a change (non-alcoholic wine or grape juice) simply because we can, but only when there is a compelling reason to do so. Orthopraxy means we avoid burdening consciences by what we distribute in a sacrament that like baptism Jesus instituted to give us “the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” (1 Peter 3).

In summary, sound biblical hermeneutics recognizes that the Holy Spirit inspired the term “fruit of the vine” and not “wine” when referring to the contents of the cup in the Lord's Supper. Stated negatively, we cannot say that fruit of the vine refers only to a fermented grape product such as wine. Stated positively, the term fruit of the vine allows for the use of non-alcoholic grape wine or grape juice in exceptional circumstances. But let us be careful to combine sound biblical hermeneutics with sound pastoral practice. Unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise, orthopraxy means we will use grape wine for the contents of the cup in the Lord's Supper.