

Wine and Communion

An Official Statement by the Session of Christ Church of Morgantown

Over the last one hundred and fifty years of church history there has been great debate about the use of wine at the Lord's Supper. Some argue that to drink wine, including at the Lord's Supper, is sin. Others argue that there should be wine and grape juice present at the Lord's Supper so that those who do and do not consider that drinking wine is Biblical can partake of the cup. Finally, there are those who think wine and only wine should be used. Christ Church falls into this last category. While we acknowledge these other positions, we believe that they do injustice to the plain teaching of Scripture. Because this is a controversial topic among Christians, we think it is important for us to state the reasons for our position.

Jesus Used Wine

The Scriptural teaching concerning wine is uniform. Wine has always been considered one of God's good gifts to man. Melchizedek gave wine to Abraham after he returned from the slaughter of the kings. (Genesis 14:18) God commanded that wine be offered to Him as part of the Levitical sacrificial system. (Exodus 29:40, Leviticus 23:13) At King David's coronation banquet in I Chronicles 12:38-40 the men drank wine. In Psalm 104:15, wine is said to be a gift from God to gladden man's heart. The great coming kingdom and the gospel are often envisioned by the prophets as having an abundance of wine. (Is. 25:6, 55:1, Hosea 14:7, Joel 3:18) The loss of wine is considered a great tragedy and a sign of God's curse upon Israel. (Isaiah 16:10, 24:7, Lamentations 2:12).

The New Testament teaching is the same. Wine is seen as a good thing when rightly used. In 1 Timothy 3:3, the elder of a church is not forbidden wine, but is told to not be addicted to it (New American Standard Version) or a drunkard (English Standard Version). Wine is a picture of the Gospel. (Luke 5:36-39) Jesus drank wine. (Luke 7:34) Paul instructs Timothy to drink wine for medicinal purposes. (I Timothy 5:23)

There is some debate about whether or not Jesus used wine at the Last Supper. Here are the reasons why we know that He did use wine during the Last Supper. First, the Passover was celebrated in the spring. Grapes were harvested in the fall. Without refrigeration there is no way the wine would not ferment. Second, the term "the fruit of the vine," which Jesus uses throughout the Last Supper accounts, was a term the Jews used during their Passover celebrations. They drank wine during Passover. There is no doubt that "fruit of the vine" equals wine, not grape juice. For a first century Jew that is all it could have referred to. Third, it is clear from Paul's account in I Corinthians that people were getting drunk at the Lord's Supper. This means they were drinking wine. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper he used wine.

There are multiple reasons not to substitute grape juice for wine in the Lord's Supper. Wine is a gift from God symbolizing the gospel and the glorious Kingdom of God. Christ used wine at the Last Supper. The apostolic church used wine in their Communion meals. We should use wine during our Communion services. This is what Christ commanded.

What About the Drunkard?

One of the more common objections to the use of wine in the Lord's Supper is the drunkard. What about the man tempted to abuse alcohol? Should we give him grape juice in order to prevent him from stumbling? Clearly the Scripture condemns drunkenness. Both the Old Testament (Proverbs 20:1) and New Testament (Ephesians 5:18) forbid drunkenness. Despite these strong warnings, we have several Old Testament and New Testament examples of wine being drunk. Let's look at the two New Testament examples.

In John 2:1-10 we have the familiar story of our Lord turning water into wine. Jesus had no problem giving dozens, possibly hundreds, of people wine. The amount of wine was somewhere

between 120-180 gallons. At the end of a wedding feast, when people are more likely to be getting drunk, Jesus made more wine when requested to do so.

A second passage, and one more to the point about the Lord's Supper, is I Corinthians 11:18-34. Here Paul is condemning the church at Corinth for their misuse of the Lord's Supper. They are not waiting for one another, but rather are eating and drinking as soon as they arrive. Thus some members of Christ's body are being left out. What is pertinent for our discussion is that there was enough wine for people to get drunk on. (I Cor. 11:21) Despite this, Paul never tells the church not to use wine. Here the problem is not that people might get drunk. They are actually getting drunk. Yet, Paul does not take this opportunity to tell them to avoid wine altogether, since it might cause the drunkard to stumble.

We are sympathetic to the temptations that some of us have. We know that there may be those at Christ Church who believe that they cannot drink the wine because it might cause them to stumble with regard to alcohol. We pray that this would be a *temporary* situation. We pray that in due time those who struggle with drunkenness would overcome that temptation by faith and the strength of the Spirit and would be able to partake of the wine as a gift from Christ for our spiritual growth.

What About the Weaker Brother?

After the drunkenness argument, the other common objection to serving wine at the Lord's Supper is that it can offend the weaker brother. Paul specifically warns Christians not to cause the weaker brother to stumble. (Romans 14, I Cor. 8) The point Paul is making in these chapters is vitally important to the life of a church. There will always be weaker and stronger Christians. How they treat one another is a sign to the watching world of their love for Christ. However, there are good reasons for concluding that the admonitions Paul gives in these passages do not prevent churches from using wine in Communion.

First, these passages have nothing to do with the Lord's Supper. That does not mean they have no bearing, but one must be careful in drawing sweeping conclusions from passages that do not deal with the subject at hand.

Second, if drinking wine in Communion causes a weaker brother to stumble then why would Paul not forbid it in I Corinthians 11, where people were getting drunk? In this passage, it is not just the possibility of stumbling that is present, but actual sin. Here we have a passage speaking explicitly of the Lord's Supper where people are getting drunk and Paul never says to not use wine.

Third, if drinking wine is a stumbling block, why are pastors not forbidden from drinking it? And why is Timothy commanded to drink it? If the point in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 is that drinking wine is a stumbling block then why should the leaders of the Church be allowed to do it?

Fourth, the point in these passages is not liturgical practice, but personal deference to a weaker brother. A church should not adjust liturgical practice because of a weaker brother. They should teach the weaker brother how to mature so he can fully participate in the service. They should not judge him. That means the stronger brother should not show contempt for the weaker brother. (Romans 14:10) However, this does not mean that liturgical practice should be adjusted because someone has a scruple.

Finally, the Lord's Supper is not a scruple/doubtful thing/opinion. (Romans 14:1) Christ commanded us to keep the Supper. He used wine. We are not justified in changing what He commanded. The Communion table is not the same as drinking wine around the dinner table. There are many issues in the Christian life, which are matters of opinion. On those issues we should be careful not to cause our brother to stumble. The Lord's Supper is not one of these issues.

Summary of the Policy of Christ Church

1. We use wine during the Lord's Supper because this is what Christ and the Apostolic church used.

2. Someone who does not wish to take the wine is welcome to eat the bread only. They still receive Christ.
3. Individuals who do not drink the wine will be gently encouraged to grow to the place where they understand the Biblical teaching concerning wine and the blessing it is to God's people. However, they will never be judged as lesser Christians because of their refusal to drink wine. They are full members of the body of Christ.