



Wine and the Lord's Supper

Wine and the Christian faith have had a long, 2000-year relationship as a means of helping Christians understand God and the gospel and as an element in our corporate worship. This paper is meant to help us understand the value of using wine in the Lord's Supper, and our rationale for introducing it into our observance at Redeemer Fellowship.

Who Drank Wine in the Bible?

Who drank wine in the Bible? Almost everyone. Drinking wine was normative for all Jews (Gen. 14:18; Judges 19:19; 1 Sam. 16:20), though the Levitical priests in service at the temple (Lv 10:8, 9). The Nazirites (Num. 6:3), and the Rechabites (Jer. 35:1-3) abstained from wine. In the New Testament, John The Baptist also abstained.

Even Jesus drank wine (Lk. 22:18; Matt. 11:18-19; 26:27-29), and was charged with drinking too much by his accusers.

"For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds."

— Matthew 11:18-19

How is Wine Depicted in Scripture?

Wine was the common drink of the Jews, enjoyed with meals and shared with friends (Gen. 14:18; Jn. 2:3). It was also used medicinally, to help the weak and the sick (2 Sm. 16:2; Prov. 31:6; 1 Tim. 5:23). Wine also played an essential part in corporate worship in both Testaments.

In the Old Testament, the "drink offering" consisted of wine (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13) and the people of God brought wine when offering sacrifices (1 Sm. 1:24). The Jews always kept wine in the temple (1 Chr. 9:29). In Isaiah 62:9, the people are blessed by the Lord in such a way as is depicted in drinking wine in the sanctuary before the presence of God. In Deuteronomy 14 we read,

"You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. And before the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose, to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the LORD

your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the LORD your God chooses, to set his name there, then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the LORD your God chooses and spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household. And you shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you.”

— Deuteronomy 14:22-27

Wine was used in celebrating the Passover, and in the New Testament was used by Jesus in giving us the ordinance of The Lord’s Supper (Lk. 22:7-23; 1 Cor. 11:17-32).

It isn’t a stretch to say that God likes wine. It was associated with life, God’s blessing, and God’s Kingdom. In Judges 9:13 we read that wine is that “which cheers God and men.” Psalm 104:15 portrays wine similarly, saying that wine “makes man’s heart glad” (Ecc. 10:19; Is. 55:1, 2; Zech. 10:7). (See Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*). Even the future fulfillment of the Kingdom of God will be characterized by the abundance of wine (Is. 25:6-8; Amos 9:13).

Of course, not every reference to wine in the Bible is positive. Drunkenness is condemned, and God’s people are warned against the danger of intoxication (Is. 28:1-7; Eph 5:18; Is. 5:11; Titus 2:3).

In his book, *What Would Jesus Drink*, Brad Whittington breaks down the biblical references of alcohol into three types. In all, there are 247 references to alcohol in Scripture. 40 are **negative** (warnings about drunkenness, potential dangers of alcohol, etc.), 145 are **positive** (signs of God’s blessing, use in worship, etc.), and 62 are **neutral** (people falsely accused of being drunk, vows of abstinence, etc.) The Bible is anything but silent on the issue of wine. It, like all alcohol, must be treated carefully, seen as a blessing, and received with thanksgiving among those who drink it. It must not be abused.

What Should the Christian’s Attitude Be Toward Wine?

It’s important for Christians to understand the whole picture. Wine is seen as the blessing of God, and as a potential means by which people bring destruction upon themselves.

“These two aspects of wine, its use and its abuse, its benefits and its curse, its acceptance in God’s sight and its abhorrence, are interwoven into the fabric of the OT so that it may gladden the heart of man (Ps. 104:15) or cause his mind to err (Is. 28:7), it can be associated with merriment (Ec. 10:19) or with anger (Is. 5:11), it can be used to uncover

the shame of Noah (Gn. 9:21) or in the hands of Melchizedek to honour Abraham (Gn. 14:18)."

— F. S. Fitzsimmonds, "Wine and Strong Drink" (*New Bible Dictionary*)

Christians should exercise caution with wine and strong drink, practicing moderation and self-control. Toward one another, it is important that we allow for liberty without passing judgement for either drinking or abstaining. One can drink to the glory of God, while another can abstain for the glory of God.

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In wine, we see the love of God in providing life and joy for all people. But we also see a deeper meaning. In wine, we see the love of God in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ which removes our guilt, satisfies God's wrath, and saves all who believe.

Wine has been used in the Lord's Supper for the past 2,000 years. Around 1869, Thomas Bramwell Welch figured out how to pasteurize grape juice, thus making non-alcoholic wine easily accessible to those who went through the trouble of making it themselves. At this time, the temperance movement was in full-swing and many churches adopted the use of Welch's grape juice in the Lord's Supper out of a desire to avoid the purchase and consumption of alcohol.

Both wine and grape juice are made from the same fruit, and visually present the same message of Christ's blood. So, does it really matter whether we use juice or wine in the Lord's Supper? Healthy churches often differ on this issue for theological and practical reasons, and we would never encourage people to break fellowship or refuse sharing in the Lord's Supper with those whose practice differs.

So why do some churches choose to use unfermented grape juice in the Lord's Supper? There are valid concerns that people often bring up regarding the use of wine in communion. What of those who struggle with alcoholism? What of those who abstain from all alcohol and whose consciences will not allow them to consume it? Isn't it illegal for children to consume alcohol?

The abuse of and addiction to alcohol is out of control in our culture, and every church is bound to have people that have been scarred by this problem. In the case of those who might not be able to handle even a sip of wine, or those whose consciences might not allow the consumption of alcohol, we should seek to help, not hurt. We should strive to maintain a biblical and compassionate approach in all we do as God's people who seek to make disciples in the world. This is why many churches that serve wine for communion also serve grape juice in a separate cup or tray, allowing people who wish to refrain from alcohol continue to participate.

Regarding children, in most of the United States it is not illegal for children to consume alcohol “in the performance of a religious ceremony or service.” In our case the Illinois General Assembly makes this clear.

In the end, we believe it is permissible to use grape juice instead of wine for the Lord’s Supper, but to only offer grape juice is not best. Wine, as the gift of God and sign of his blessing, was used during the Passover and in the institution of the Lord’s Supper, and following that pattern is biblical.

There are a variety of ways churches approach this ordinance, and while there are better and worse ways to do it, we should be careful to avoid unnecessary division between or within churches. John Calvin emphasized such grace in his Institutes of the Christian Religion.

“In regard to the external form of the ordinance, whether or not believers are to take into their hands and divide among themselves, or each is to eat what is given to him; whether they are to return the cup to the deacon or hand it to their neighbour; whether the bread is to be leavened or unleavened, and the wine to be red or white, is of no consequence. These things are indifferent, and left free to the Church...”

— Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV, xvii, 43

Wine is a gift from God, but the Lord’s Supper is an even greater gift. What grace he has given to his people that we may participate in his body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16). Let’s be biblical in our practice, charitable with differing brothers and sisters, and share the Lord’s Table in faith and joy.

Beginning next Sunday, May 27, you will have the option to choose **wine** or **grape juice** at Redeemer Fellowship as we observe the Lord’s Supper. We hope this move is a blessing to the church as we worship our triune God together in spirit and truth.