

# Wine versus Grape Juice in the Lord's Supper: Reformed and Lutheran Perspectives

## Biblical Foundations

Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at a Passover meal using bread and a cup of wine. In Luke's account He speaks of the "fruit of the vine" (Greek *prōton helikonos*) in the cup <sup>1</sup>, a Jewish idiom clearly meaning wine. Matthew 26:27–28 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–25 similarly report Jesus taking "the cup...saying, 'This is my blood of the new covenant'" <sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>. These passages tie the covenantal **cup of blessing** to Christ's blood, presupposing fermented grape wine as the element. Indeed, Paul's description of the Lord's Supper in Corinth implies real wine was used: he rebukes believers that one of them gets "drunk" (Greek *metheuei*) at the meal <sup>4</sup>, something unthinkable if only unfermented juice were present. In short, the New Testament narrative and Jewish Passover context portray the Supper as celebrated with wine (fruit of the vine), symbolizing joy, blessing and covenantal blood <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>.

## Theological Rationale: Symbol and Substance

The **use of wine** in the Supper is deeply rooted in Scripture and tradition. Early Christians saw wine as rich in biblical symbolism: Psalm 104 calls wine "gladdens the heart of man" and Jeremiah and Exodus link blood with covenant. Church Fathers made this explicit. Clement of Alexandria (c.200 AD) writes that at the Lord's Supper "He blessed the wine, saying, 'Take, drink: this is my blood — the blood of the vine'" <sup>5</sup>. Cyprian (3rd c.) likewise insists that "the cup offered...should be offered mingled with wine; for Christ says, 'I am the true vine,' and His blood is not water but wine" <sup>6</sup>. Calvin noted that just as bread nourishes the body, **wine** (blood) "gladdens the heart" and strengthens us spiritually <sup>7</sup>. In Reformed confessions, the elements are clearly "bread and wine" (the **fruit of the vine**) <sup>8</sup>. For example, the Westminster Confession (1646) specifies that the Lord's Supper signs remain "bread and wine, as they were before" <sup>8</sup>.

Wine has traditionally symbolized joy and covenantal blessing. Early Protestants argued that Christ commanded **wine**: Martin Luther flatly declared, "One shouldn't use anything else than wine... If a person can't tolerate wine, omit [the sacrament]" <sup>9</sup>. Similarly, Charles Hodge explained that the Greek word *oinos* in the New Testament denotes fermented grape juice, the wine "in that state in which it was known as wine," by divine command and longstanding church custom <sup>10</sup>. A.A. Hodge likewise affirmed that *oinos* is "the fermented juice of the grape...made essential by the command and example of Christ, and by the uniform custom of the Christian church from the beginning" <sup>11</sup>. In sum, proponents of wine emphasize that Christ's own usage and millennia of church practice point to fermented wine as the proper element.

By contrast, **arguments for grape juice** rest on pastoral concerns and Christian liberty. Advocates note that Scripture nowhere explicitly forbids unfermented juice and that the main purpose of the Supper is Christ's body and blood, not the potency of alcohol. For example, one Reformed pastor observes that "neither the use of wine nor the use of grape juice is wrong in the observance of the sacrament" <sup>12</sup>. Instead, he argues, "there is strong biblical precedent for the use of wine" but also stresses caring for "weaker brethren" who cannot drink alcohol <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup>. The same author recommends offering **both** wine and juice for a time, to

accommodate different convictions <sup>14</sup> . This approach appeals to Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8: Scripture condemns drunkenness (wine used immoderately) but holds that moderate use of alcohol is a “*thing indifferent*” morally <sup>13</sup> . In principle, if a person’s conscience or recovery from addiction requires abstinence, church unity calls for compassion – as long as one upholds that the sacrament signifies Christ’s blood. (Lutheran pastors similarly note that drinking “with a little water” is traditional <sup>15</sup> , but they generally balk at grape juice as the normal element – see below.) In practice, many Reformed churches today treat the issue as one of pastoral prudence: wine is normative, but grape juice may be provided for those in need of accommodation <sup>14</sup> <sup>15</sup> .

## Historical Practice in the Church

**Early Church:** From the beginning Christians used bread and fermented wine. The Didache (1st–2nd c.) and Justin Martyr affirm the cup as “fruit of the vine.” Church Fathers uniformly used wine, often mixed with water for the communion cup. Apart from fringe sects like the Encratites (also called Tatianites) who forbade wine as a mistaken asceticism, Christian practice always employed real wine. (Encratites were considered heretical and disappeared <sup>10</sup> .) Cyprian’s 3rd-century letter (Epistle 62) insists that omitting wine would contradict Christ’s own act <sup>6</sup> , and Clement likewise speaks of Jesus’s cup as real wine <sup>5</sup> .

**Medieval to Reformation:** In the medieval Western Church, laity typically received only the bread (doctrine of concomitance), but *when* wine was available it was always fermented. Reformation leaders restored communion in both kinds. Anglicans (Cranmer’s Book of Common Prayer) directed consecrating “*bread and wine*” as elements of the Eucharist <sup>16</sup> . Lutherans strongly insisted on communion under both species; Martin Luther taught that Christ’s real presence is in both bread and wine and that neither is to be omitted. Reformed churches (Zwingli, Calvin, Knox) likewise served wine. Calvin’s Geneva Catechism explicitly used wine as the symbol for Christ’s blood, saying Christ’s body “nourishes our souls” and His blood (as wine) “gladdens our hearts” <sup>7</sup> . John Knox and other 16th-century Reformed in Scotland and England followed Calvin’s example: the Presbyterian Scots Confession (1560) and the Anglican 39 Articles (1563) presuppose bread and wine as instituted signs. Indeed, the Church of England today still teaches that the Eucharist outwardly “*takes the form of a shared meal of bread and wine*” <sup>16</sup> .

**19th–20th Century:** For nearly 2,000 years, Western and Eastern churches alike used fermented wine in the sacrament. The great upheaval came with the 19th-century Temperance movement. In mid-1800s America, activist Protestants pressed for *teetotalism*. Many of these were Methodists, Baptists, and others who regarded all alcohol as sinful. For church services (including Communion), this created a dilemma. In 1864 the Methodist Episcopal Church (USA) formally recommended that “*the pure juice of the grape be used in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.*” <sup>17</sup> . Shortly thereafter Thomas B. Welch (a Methodist steward) developed pasteurization for grape juice (1869), enabling truly “unfermented wine” <sup>18</sup> . By the 1870s–1880s many Methodist congregations were serving Welch’s juice, and in 1880 Methodist rules even made the use of unfermented grape juice mandatory when practicable <sup>19</sup> . Baptist and Congregational churches followed suit in large measure, making grape juice commonplace in American Protestantism by early 20th century.

Reformed churches were divided. Some Presbyterians and Reformed bodies (often influenced by the Presbyterian “Abstainer” movement) required total abstinence for members <sup>20</sup> ; others continued using wine. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) notes that in the 19th century *some* Presbyterian synods went so far as to prohibit officers from even taking Communion wine <sup>20</sup> . In contrast, many others simply offered grape juice as an option. By the 20th century, groups like the United Church of Christ (Congregationalist/Presbyterian merger) and the United Methodist Church had largely normalized grape

juice in Communion. However, many conservative Reformed denominations (e.g. the PCA, OPC) kept wine as normative while often allowing juice for those in recovery.

**Lutheran Response:** Lutheran churches generally resisted the grape-juice trend. The Missouri Synod's 1983 theological opinion explicitly rejected substituting juice. It noted Luther's own advice: *"Nothing else but wine should be used"* and any suggestion of grape juice comes from non-Lutheran "sectarian" temperance groups <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup>. Current LCMS theologians reaffirm that Lutheran practice traditionally uses bread and (fermented) wine <sup>15</sup>, and many state clearly that offering only juice is contrary to Christ's command. (Some Lutheran guidelines allow "in certain circumstances" juice for pastors with alcohol intolerance <sup>15</sup>, but official liturgies still call for *"pure grape wine"*.)

## Temperance Movement and Grape Juice

The American Temperance movement was decisive in introducing grape juice. For nearly two millennia, wine had been the sacramental cup. As Christianity Today notes, *"for 1800 years"* Christians used fermented wine in Communion <sup>23</sup>. But by the mid-19th century alcohol was widely seen as a public evil. Temperance activists (including many clergy) argued that consuming any alcohol, even sacramentally, was sinful. To avoid giving offense, creative laity first tried homemade "unfermented" brews or even substituted water in the cup <sup>24</sup>. Thomas Welch's pasteurization method (1869) provided a real solution: a shelf-stable, non-alcoholic grape juice. The Methodist Episcopal Church had already urged its use in 1864 <sup>17</sup>, and by 1880 it made grape juice the official *"pure, unfermented juice of the grape"* for Communion where feasible <sup>19</sup>. Methodist and Baptist conferences began advertising Welch's juice by the 1890s <sup>25</sup>. The US Episcopal Church likewise officially authorized grape juice by 1916, and by Prohibition era it was common in many Protestant churches.

Reformed denominations varied. In many parts of Europe and Africa, where the Temperance fervor was weaker, churches continued using wine. In the United States, however, even some Presbyterian and Reformed congregations switched. By the mid-20th century, denominations like the United Presbyterian Church and United Church of Christ regularly served grape juice. In recent decades some of these churches have revisited the issue: for example, an OPC congregation reported *"we will continue to offer grape juice for those who prefer it"* while adding wine back to the trays <sup>14</sup>. In contrast, the LCMS and many conservative Anglicans still preach that "only wine" is valid, and that substituting juice is an unwarranted innovation <sup>22</sup> <sup>15</sup>.

## Theologians and Confessions

Prominent Reformed and Lutheran writers have spoken plainly. **Martin Luther** famously said, *"One shouldn't use anything else than wine. If a person can't tolerate wine, omit [communion]"* <sup>9</sup>. **John Calvin** wrote that the bread is Christ's body and the wine His blood because *"as by wine the hearts of men are gladdened... so by the blood of our Lord the same benefits are received by our souls."* <sup>7</sup>. **Charles Hodge** insisted that the New Testament word *oinos* "means the fermented juice of the grape, and no other liquid must be used in the Lord's Supper" <sup>10</sup>. **A.A. Hodge** likewise declared that *"wine, that is οἶνος, the fermented juice of the grape...[is] made essential by the command and example of Christ, and by the uniform custom of the Christian Church from the beginning."* <sup>11</sup>. In short, classical Reformed theology treated wine (fermented grape juice) as an indispensable sacramental sign by divine institution.

Anglican authorities concur. The **39 Articles** (Art. 28) affirm that in the Supper *“the bread and wine...[are] by the Word of God...the body and blood of Christ”*, reflecting both Reformed and Lutheran thought. Modern Anglican liturgical texts likewise stipulate *“wheat bread...and the wine [to be] pure grape wine, wherewith a little water may be mingled”* <sup>15</sup>. The Church of England website still explains that the Eucharist *“takes the form of a shared meal of bread and wine, recalling... Jesus associated...the sharing of wine with his death”* <sup>16</sup>. As an Anglican guideline notes, while Lutherans *sometimes* allow juice, *“it is not ... the practice of the Anglican Church to use grape juice as an alternative”* <sup>15</sup>.

**Modern Confessions/Catechisms:** Reformed confessions uniformly name bread and wine. The Westminster Confession declares the elements to be *“bread and wine”* <sup>8</sup>. The Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A 75) similarly calls the Supper a participation in Christ’s body and blood through bread and wine. Lutheran confessions (e.g. Formula of Concord) likewise speak of *“the true body and blood of Christ, under the bread and wine”* as instituted by Christ. In contrast, no major historic confession endorses grape juice as the required element; indeed, as noted above, the lack of command is taken by many theologians as implying adherence to the original scriptural element unless pastoral reasons intervene.

## Conclusion: Evaluating Wine versus Grape Juice

**In summary**, the Reformed and Anglican traditions historically assumed wine (the fermented juice of the grape) as the proper cup in Holy Communion. Scripture depicts the Supper in terms of the Passover wine and covenant blood <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>, and Reformers from Luther and Calvin onward stressed the significance of *bread and wine* as ordained elements <sup>9</sup> <sup>7</sup>. Confessional standards echo this understanding <sup>8</sup> <sup>15</sup>. For these reasons, many Reformed and Lutheran churches teach that using grape juice is at best a non-essential substitution and, at worst, a departure from Christ’s ordinance.

Nevertheless, modern considerations have led others to permit grape juice. Citing Christian liberty (Romans 14, 1 Cor 8) and pastoral care for recovering alcoholics, some theologians note that *“neither the use of wine nor the use of grape juice is wrong”* <sup>12</sup>, so long as each believer acts responsibly. In practice, churches often address this by offering both: one OPC pastor suggests adding wine *“because [we] will continue to offer grape juice for those who prefer it”* <sup>14</sup>. This compromise aims to uphold biblical precedent while not making an *“occasion to sin”* for any communicant. Ultimately, a church today must weigh the biblical and confessional insistence on wine against pastoral realities. Many conservative Reformed bodies (including historic Anglican and Lutheran communities) lean toward wine-only, quoting tradition and theology. Others (especially in the wake of the Temperance era) allow grape juice as a useful accommodation under love. In all cases, the guiding principle is fidelity to Christ’s institution (bread and the fruit of the vine) combined with love for the congregation’s weakest members <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup>.

**Sources:** New Testament scriptures <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup>; Early Church Fathers <sup>6</sup> <sup>5</sup>; Reformation and post-Reformation theologians <sup>9</sup> <sup>7</sup> <sup>10</sup>; Reformed confessions <sup>8</sup>; OPC report <sup>12</sup> <sup>14</sup>; Lutheran doctrinal opinions <sup>21</sup> <sup>22</sup> <sup>15</sup>; Temperance and church history sources <sup>17</sup> <sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:27 Then He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you.

<https://biblehub.com/matthew/26-27.htm>

3 1 Corinthians 11:25 In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

[https://biblehub.com/1\\_corinthians/11-25.htm](https://biblehub.com/1_corinthians/11-25.htm)

4 The Cup in I Corinthians - Wine in the Lord's Supper

<https://wineinthelordssupper.net/the-cup-in-i-corinthians/>

5 CHURCH FATHERS: The Paedagogus (Clement of Alexandria)

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02092.htm>

6 CHURCH FATHERS: Epistle 62 (Cyprian of Carthage)

<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050662.htm>

7 9 10 11 Voices from History - Wine in the Lord's Supper

<https://wineinthelordssupper.net/voices-from-history/>

8 Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter XXIX - Of the Lord's Supper

<https://www.the-highway.com/WCFChXXIX.html>

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[https://opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=237](https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=237)

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16 The Eucharist | The Church of England

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21 22 Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology: The Fruit of the Vine in the Sacrament of the Altar

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