Juice

From time to time every consistory receives a letter requesting that grape juice also be served at the Lord’s Supper as an alternative to the wine. Sometimes I wonder why it has to be grape juice. It could really be any other kind of beverage, as long as it is not an alcoholic drink. The rationale for juice is probably that it looks like wine; we do want to keep up appearances.

This is not an unimportant matter and the question about what is proper in this respect has even risen to the level of the major assemblies. Synod Chatham, to mention only the last assembly dealing with this question, made the following consideration: “Since the confessions are normative in the churches, Synod considers that wine should be used at the Lord’s Supper” (Acts, Art 109, 4.2). Synod added, “This does not exclude the possibility of making an exception.”

Such a two-pronged decision can easily be abused. I can imagine someone writing to a consistory: Synods Neerlandia and Chatham said that the use of grape juice is exceptional but legal. End of discussion: give us juice. But the Synod did not really say that.

Synod upheld the norm which is that wine be used. And then Synod allowed for an exception. Chatham said, “Allowing for an exception demonstrates Christian love and compassion for those with difficulties.” But in church life we see time and again that the exception easily becomes a norm or is regarded as a right.

“The fruit of the vine”

Those who would argue in favour of having grape juice always available at the Holy Supper sometimes point to the fact that our Lord does not refer to wine but speaks of “this fruit of the vine” (Matthew 26:29) or “the fruit of the vine” (Luke 22:17). The fruit of the vine, it is said, does not necessarily mean wine, for juice is also a fruit of the vine (see also Acts, Chatham, Art 109, 3.3). The circle is round again.

So we have developed a divergent custom in our churches. Some serve only wine. Some would rather serve only juice. Others prefer to have both and to leave the decision to the individual members. We all want to show Christian love and compassion. The question is, however, how this love must be shown. Also, love must come from both sides.

The expression “the fruit of the vine” refers to wine. To conclude otherwise is to engage in exegetical destruction. Our Lord instituted the Supper at the Passover, where wine was used as drink. The holy catholic church has therefore always used wine in the Supper. Wine is an ecumenical symbol.

Please note also that our Lord at his last Passover during the institution of the Lord’s Supper referred to Himself saying “I am the true vine…” (John 15:12). The word for “vine” (ampelos) also combined with the adjective “true” (alethinos) lead us to think of a vine that bears grapes used for wine.

Wine as festive drink

We ought to remember that wine has a special character and function the Bible. Passover and the Supper which replaced it are called “festivals” (Exodus 12:14, 1 Corinthians 5:8) and wine is a drink which is in keeping with the festive nature of the feast.
The Lord has given wine to his children. There has been much abuse of this gift and the abuse has led to broken lives and families. But other gifts of God are also abused and we do not replace them.

In Psalm 104 we read about “wine that gladdens the heart of man.” It is one of the special creation gifts that the Lord has given to his children. It is refreshing and invigorating.

Wine is a festive drink. We usually uncork a bottle of wine only when there is a special reason. I find it remarkable that the Lord Jesus’ first miracle was to change water into wine at a wedding feast (John 2). Today many might say that was a wrong start. But our Lord made the best wine abundantly available, for the occasion demanded it.

The Lord Himself therefore assured us that He would not drink of the wine again until the day “when I drink it anew with you in the Kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 26:29). What kind of a day will this be? In Revelation 19 we find that it is a great festival, the wedding of the Lamb. Christ will not drink wine until that great day. But then the occasion demands it.

Our Lord’s Supper is an anticipation of that great wedding feast. Therefore wine is served and we receive it in the faith that one day we will drink it with Christ at the great wedding feast.

**What about alcoholism?**

Where is now my “Christian love and compassion”? There are people who because of the affliction of alcoholism cannot take even a drop of the wine. They want something else; grape juice comes to mind as suitable replacement.

What’s wrong with a replacement? After all, neither wine nor juice contains any magical qualities. Someone wrote: we should “not cling to the outward symbols of bread and wine.” So juice is okay. But the believer is not encouraged to switch beverages. The “sursum corda” directs us all to heaven, where Christ is. It does not say that the symbols are only outward and hence easily interchangeable, but it says that we must get beyond the symbols of bread and wine!

It is my opinion that those who cannot take wine should abstain from using it. It is a necessary personal decision made in one’s own responsibility. Abstaining has no bearing on one’s salvation but shows forth the humility that is required of a Christian. If there is to be an exception a consistory must judge each case on its own merit and method.

Replacing wine with juice is almost a pandemic. I think it has more to do with the temperance league than the catholic church.

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