

## **Department of Liturgics**

### **Commission on Worship**

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#### **Should grape juice be used instead of wine in Holy Communion?**

Some Protestant churches use grape juice instead of wine for Holy Communion. This practice has been adopted by some Lutheran congregations without much question. They seem to assume that it is better to use non-alcoholic grape juice rather than alcoholic wine.

Until modern methods of preserving grape juice without fermentation were invented, it was not possible to use anything except wine in the Lord's Supper. Grape juice would not keep unless it was fermented and contained some alcohol in it. So only wine was used. Alcoholics and people who were allergic to alcohol were permitted to receive the bread by itself without the wine. But since various ways were discovered to preserve grape juice without any alcohol, some churches, and that includes some Lutheran churches, have offered grape juice as an alternative to wine for people who were alcoholics or allergic to wine. The use of grape juice has always been regarded as a pastoral exception rather than normal practice.

Under the influence of Pietism, some Protestant churches have, over the last hundred years, used grape juice rather than wine in the Lord's Supper because they wanted to promote temperance in the use of alcohol, or because they believed that Christians should not use alcohol or any other drug. Some Christian groups even went so far as to claim that it was a sin to drink alcohol. The rejection of wine also came to be associated in some Protestant churches with adamant rejection of the real presence of Christ's blood in the sacrament. So even now, some churches refuse to use wine because they identify its use with the Roman Catholic teaching on the presence of Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion. They therefore use grape juice as an anti-Catholic gesture, a confessional statement about their rejection of the real presence. Since they believe that the purpose of the Lord's Supper is to remember Christ's death, it does not matter whether wine was used or not. For them the teaching that we actually drink Christ's blood is so offensive and abhorrent that it must be avoided at all costs.

The Lutheran Church uses wine rather than grape juice or other forms of non-alcoholic wine for four reasons.

- In the ancient world all wine had to be fermented. It therefore contained alcohol. Otherwise it could not have been kept. The winemakers in ancient Israel did not have our modern methods of sterilisation, or refrigeration. So Jesus must have used

alcoholic wine. Since he used wine, we too celebrate the sacrament with wine. We thereby obey his command that we do the same things that he did in remembrance of him. By his word he attaches the gift of his blood for the forgiveness of sins to the use of wine.

- If we don't use wine, some people may doubt whether the sacrament is valid or not. So for the sake of conscience we insist that wine should normally be used unless a person is an alcoholic or allergic to wine.
- In our ecumenical context here in Australia the use of grape juice could easily be taken as a rejection of the real presence of Christ's blood. Since the churches that teach that we do not receive and drink Christ's blood in the sacrament also use grape juice to reinforce their teaching, the use of grape juice instead of wine could be taken as a rejection of our confession that we drink Christ's life-giving blood in the sacrament.
- Practically speaking, the use of alcoholic wine minimises the possibility of cross-infection, because alcohol is such an efficient sterilising agent. It therefore also makes it possible for us to use the common cup, which we prefer to use for important symbolic reasons (1 Cor 10:16-17).