



Conducted by
Frank Worgan

“Would it be wrong to use ordinary (i.e. alcoholic) wine at the Lord's Table?”

An article sent to me by a brother in the Church poses a question concerning the use of the ordinary wine at the Lord's Table. I have read through the article a couple of times to make sure that I understand what is being expressed and it seems quite clear that the writer is arguing for the use of alcoholic wine at the Supper. I use the term "alcoholic wine" to distinguish it from "unfermented grape juice," which is generally used among the Lord's people; certainly in the seventeen or more countries where I have had the privilege of worshipping .

The only occasion on which I was served alcoholic wine at the Lord's Supper was in Athens, Greece, and when, at the close of the service, I gently asked the brethren about it - (because I did not recognise the taste) - I was informed that they had held a meeting and had decided that, should American brethren cease to provide the cans of unfermented grape-juice, they would have a problem since, they said, unfermented

grape-juice is not available in Greece. For that reason they had made a "policy decision" - their own term - to use the wine which was available. Of course, I cannot say whether grape juice is or is not obtainable in Athens. I can only report what they told me.

First, let me say that I am sorry that, the writer of the article falls into the error of drawing conclusions which are not warranted by the scriptures; in other words, of speaking where the scriptures do not speak. For example, he calls the Lord's Supper 'spiritual food', but I know of nothing in the New Testament scriptures which says that the Lord's Supper is meant to be seen as "spiritual food." The Lord Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of Me" and Paul tells us that we "*show forth* (proclaim or tell again) *the Lord's death until He comes.*" (1 Cor. 11:26).

Thus whilst it is true that we are encouraged and blessed as the result of our regular act of worship, the Lord's Supper is never represented in the Word of God as a "means of grace" imparting either forgiveness or spiritual strength. It is essentially a communal act of worship and witness.

Again; the writer also appears to think that the Lord's Supper was a part of the Jewish Passover feast, but he surely cannot really believe this, because, frankly, it is not true! We all know that no-one ever celebrated the Lord's Supper before that night in the Upper Room.

I am sorry to have to say that there are other places in the article where the author finds spiritual meaning where scripture assigns none; and that is always a highly dangerous course to take.

Furthermore, whilst the article contains a great deal of interesting material relative to the Jewish Seder (Passover) celebration, most of it has no bearing on the subject being discussed. For instance, he refers to something written by our very highly esteemed and scholarly brother, Everett Ferguson and tells us he found it interesting that throughout his book, Br. Ferguson "referred only to 'wine' and never to 'grape juice.'"

Well even scholarly brethren are sometimes imprecise in that way, and, knowing both the book to which reference is made and the the author himself, I think I can say that brother Ferguson would tell us that the matter of 'wine' v. 'grape juice' was not foremost in his mind that time.

Surely it is far more significant that, in instituting the Supper, the Lord Jesus Himself used only the term 'the fruit of the vine', and never once used the word 'wine.' He could very easily have used the word 'wine,' if He had so desired. He could have said, "I will not drink henceforth of the WINE until I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). Had He done so there would have been no argument. But He did not, and we should bear this fact in mind.

Emmet Russell makes this observation:

"At the Last Supper Jesus spoke of 'the fruit of the vine,' as in the Passover liturgy; it may be a studied avoidance of the term 'wine,' indicating that the drink was unfermented, as the bread was unleavened." As a matter of fact, the prayer of thanks used at the Passover celebration, to which Russell refers, translates something like this; "We thank Thee, Lord, Maker of Heaven and Earth, who has caused the Vine to grow in the earth."

Let me, therefore, make a few observations of this matter of the "Wine."

1. It is important to remember that **wine did not form a part of the original Passover meal, as commanded by God, and was never commanded by the Mosaic Law.** It was a later addition, coming after the Babylonian Captivity along with other

items, such as the '*charoseth*,' which was a dish consisting of raisins, bruised dates and other kinds of fruit, spiced with vinegar. (It is therefore interesting, to say the least, that the Lord Jesus accepted the practices of the time).

2. I notice also, that the article makes a great deal of wine as 'a symbol of joyous life,' but this has no relevancy in the present discussion. What is truly relevant, if we recognise that the fruit of the vine represents the blood of Christ, is the fact that the Hebrew word for "blood" - "*dam*" occurs 362 times in the O.T., whilst in the N.T., the Greek word, '*aima*' - or - '*haima*' occurs 98 times; **and their overwhelming usage throughout the Bible relates to violent death - not to life.**

3. As for wine being used as a *joyous* symbol, no one reading the account of the institution of the Supper can possibly suggest that there was any sense of joy present that night. On the contrary, Luke reports that Jesus earnestly desired to eat the Passover with the disciples before he *suffered*. And both Matthew and Mark report that, when He spoke about his betrayal, there was a **real atmosphere of sorrow in the Upper Room.**

4. There can be no doubt that the fruit of the vine, the juice of the grape, with its redness and its appearance of blood, represents our Lord's death as the Sin-bearer; as the sacrificial Lamb of God. The article rightly says that the blood of Christ is represented by the 'blood of grapes.' Well, no-one can deny that what our congregations use is 'the blood of grapes, or the fruit of the vine.'

5. You will recall that Paul tells us that "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, **and it is significant that Jesus chose to die at the time of the Passover, and not, for instance, on the Day of Atonement.**

The significance lies in the fact that whilst the Day of Atonement was a recurring event - for Israel an annual necessity - the Passover occurred only once. It was never to be repeated. In this way our Lord revealed that He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, and, as the Passover-lamb, His death once for all, was the anti-type of the ancient, one-time-only deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

6. I certainly agree with the writer of the article that there can be absolutely no question as to the nature of the bread which Jesus used at the institution of the Supper. It was undoubtedly unleavened, because it would have been impossible for Him to have used anything other than unleavened bread. **The strict command of the Law prohibited the eating of anything containing leaven during the time of the Passover.** The teaching in Exodus 12:17-20 is so plain as to be unmistakable.

a) The Passover Feast itself was called the 'feast of unleavened bread.'

b) This prohibition on the use of anything leavened lasted for seven days.

c) Anyone violating this law was excommunicated.

Because of this law, in the evening prior to the onset of the Passover, which commenced on 15th Nisan, the Jews must search their homes for anything '*hametz*,' or leavened.

In defining "*hametz*" Hertzberg, the Jewish author of the work "Judaism," in the series "Great Religions of Modern Man," tells us that; it is anything at all, whether edible or not, made from grain, barley, oats, flour or wheat bran, which, due to contact with water, or any other liquid containing water, could ferment, or was in process of fermentation, or had fermented.

And, if anything "*hametz*" was found, it had to be burned or otherwise cleared out of their dwellings. The Passover could not be celebrated where there was anything which had fermented.

This prohibition of all things fermented seems to me to cover both the bread and whatever was drunk when the Supper was instituted.

After all, just as it is impossible to make bread without the use of water, it is impossible to deny the water-content of ordinary wine, which is, of course, grape-juice which has been allowed to ferment.

7. Remember that even before New Testament times they knew how to prevent grape-juice from fermenting.

Cato wrote *"If you wish to have "must" - (i.e., 'unfermented grape-juice') all year, put grape-juice in an amphora and seal the cork with pitch and sink it in a fish-pond. After 30 days take it out. It will be grape-juice (i.e. non-alcoholic) for a whole year."* ("De Agri Cultura CSX"). Just how effective this was I cannot say, but it is clear that Cato believed it worked!

A final word, then, about this matter of fermentation.

There is no question that consistently in the New Testament, leaven is used as a symbol of sin and evil; as a disintegrating destructive force. For example:-

Matt. 16:6 *"Beware of the leaven of the scribes and Pharisees."*

1 Cor. 5:8 *"Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, AS YOU REALLY ARE UNLEAVENED. For Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."*

Remember that the symbols and figures used in the scriptures are consistent in their meaning. A symbol cannot represent good in one place and evil in another.

The bread of the Supper is unleavened because it represents the purity of the life of the Lord Jesus. The unfermented fruit of the vine represents the purity of His sinless sacrifice.

When people use alcoholic wine at the Feast it can only be because they have failed to understand that nothing fermented can properly represent the perfection of either the life or the death of the Lord Jesus.

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