

ON THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Proof of the Cup

Where the power of the sacrament actually lies — and why the wine-only argument misplaces it

Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*
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The argument surfaces wherever Lutherans gather online, as predictable as the seasons. Someone mentions that their congregation offers both wine and grape juice at the altar. Someone else replies — kindly enough, usually — that this cannot be right. *Proper communion is wine only*. Though, it is often added, there are wines with the alcohol removed, and those are acceptable, because they are somehow still wine and somehow different from juice.

I want to take that position seriously, because the people who hold it are usually trying to guard something worth guarding. They have seen what happens when the Supper is treated casually — when the elements become whatever is convenient, and the meal Christ instituted drifts toward a symbol of itself. Against that drift, insisting on the historic elements feels like sacramental seriousness. Often it is.

But the wine-only argument, pressed even gently, does something its defenders do not intend. It relocates the power of the sacrament from Christ's word and promise to the chemistry of the cup. And that is a trade no Lutheran should want to make.

What the Lord Called the Cup

Start where every sacramental question must start: with the institution itself.

On the night in which He was betrayed, our Lord took bread, and after supper the cup. And in all three synoptic accounts, He gives the cup's contents a name — not *oinos*, the ordinary Greek word for wine, but a fuller, older phrase: *the fruit of the vine*. “I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom” — Matthew 26:29, with Mark 14:25 and Luke 22:18 running parallel. Paul, handing on what he received, says simply “the cup” — 1 Corinthians 11:25.

Was it wine? Almost certainly — fermented wine was the ordinary table drink of the ancient world, and the Passover cups were wine. The church's practice from the beginning has been wine, and that unbroken habit deserves real honor. A congregation that keeps wine at its altar keeps faith with twenty centuries of Christians, and no one should pressure it to do otherwise.

But notice what Scripture does not do. It does not define the cup by its alcohol. It does not specify a vintage, a color, a proof. The Lord's own name for the element reaches past fermentation to the thing itself: what the vine gives. The wine-only position asks the text to bear a precision the text never claims.

And it asks the same of history. First-century wine was not modern wine. It was routinely cut with water — two or three parts water to one of wine was ordinary practice — and it

existed on a continuum that ran from fresh-pressed must to the fully fermented product, because in a world without refrigeration or pasteurization, grape juice did not keep. It could not sit on a shelf. The sharp binary we argue about — wine over here, juice over there, a bright line between — became possible only in 1869, when a Methodist dentist named Thomas Welch worked out how to pasteurize grape juice and stop its fermentation. He did it, with no apparent sense of irony, for communion use.

Which means the question “wine or grape juice?” is younger than the light bulb. Scripture does not answer it because Scripture could not have asked it.

The Argument That Proves Too Much

Neither could the Confessions. The Augsburg Confession, the Catechisms, the Formula — all speak of “bread and wine,” because bread and wine were what every altar in Christendom held. The language is descriptive of the church’s universal practice, not a ruling on a controversy that would not exist for another three hundred years. Asking the Confessors to adjudicate pasteurized juice is like asking them to rule on gluten-free hosts. They confess what the Supper *is* — the true body and blood of Christ, under the bread and wine, given to Christians to eat and to drink — not the ABV at which it is valid.

But it is the modern concession, the one about de-alcoholized wine, that gives the whole game away. Wine with the alcohol removed is acceptable, the argument runs, because it is *still wine* — different, somehow, from juice.

Sit with that for a moment, because it proves far too much. If the alcohol can be removed and the element remain valid, then the alcohol was never the essential thing. And once the alcohol is gone, what remains to distinguish de-alcoholized wine from grape juice? Not substance — both are non-alcoholic fruit of the vine. Only history: one was fermented and then unfermented by machine; the other was never fermented at all. The distinction is not chemical but biographical. It asks us to believe that sacramental validity hangs not on what is in the cup but on which factory the grapes passed through on their way to it.

No one actually believes that, once it is said out loud. The de-alcoholized concession is not a refinement of the wine-only position; it is its quiet abandonment. It concedes that the fermentation was never the point — and then keeps insisting on the fence anyway.

The Word Comes to the Element

Here is where the Lutheran instinct, properly consulted, settles the matter. The Large Catechism, teaching on the sacraments, reaches back to Augustine for its governing prin-

ciple: the Word comes to the element, and it becomes a sacrament. That is the whole architecture of sacramental theology in one sentence. Water is plain water — until the Word of God is joined to it, and then it is a baptism, a gracious water of life. Bread is common bread, the cup common table fare — until Christ's word and promise are joined to them: *given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.*

For you. The power was never in the substance. The bread on the paten is not extraordinary bread; the miracle is not agricultural. What makes the Supper the Supper is that the crucified and risen Christ has bound Himself by His own word to these ordinary things and made them the bearers of His body and blood, His forgiveness, His life. The consecration does not upgrade the chemistry. It attaches a promise.

This is precisely why the elements are ordinary — why they have always been ordinary. Plain water from the tap. Bread of the kind found on any table. The fruit of the vine, the common drink of the common meal. God does not deliver His gifts through rare substances that must be quested for and certified; He hides His treasures in the humblest packaging creation offers, so that no one can mistake where the power lies. The lowliness of the means is not a defect to be compensated for with stricter specifications. It is the design. It is the theology of the cross applied to a table.

So when we begin adding requirements the Lord never gave — auditing alcohol content, drawing lines between the vine's fruit fermented and unfermented, treating the proof of the cup as load-bearing — we should be honest about the direction we are moving. We are shifting the sacrament's weight off the Word and onto the substance. We are looking for the power in the wrong place. That is a fool's errand, and it is something worse than an errand: it is a theology of glory wearing a liturgical costume, seeking God's gifts in the impressiveness of the vessel rather than in the promise attached to it.

Common on Purpose

None of this is an argument against wine. Let me say it plainly, so no one mistakes the point: wine is the historic norm, the best practice, and the strongest expression of continuity with the church catholic. A congregation that communes with wine alone, and does so from conviction, does well. I would not move it an inch.

But there is a difference — all the difference in the world — between commending a practice and binding a conscience. The congregation that also offers the unfermented fruit of the vine, caring for the recovering alcoholic in the third pew, the member whose medication forbids alcohol, the tender conscience shaped by another tradition's scruples, has not

voided Christ's promise. His word is not so fragile. The gift is not so fussy. The Lord who was content to bind His grace to water, bread, and vine is not undone by pasteurization.

What would undo something — not the sacrament, but our confession of it — is teaching people to look for the Supper's validity in the cup's chemistry rather than in Christ's words. Because the person who learns to ask *was the alcohol content right?* has been trained to ask, eventually, *was any of it right? Was the bread correct, the pastor worthy, my faith strong enough?* — and down that road lies no comfort at all. The sacrament exists to give certainty, and its certainty rests on one thing only: He said it. *This is my body. This is my blood. Given and shed for you.*

That is the marvel, and it needs no additive. God takes the most ordinary stuff of human life and, by joining His Word to it, delivers the most extraordinary gifts imaginable — forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. The means are common on purpose, so that the glory lands where it belongs.

Not in the proof of the cup. In the promise over it.