

the last word

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, as our church was pecking its way out of the shell of tradition, it dawned on me that the early church probably drank wine during communion—not grape juice. As a Southern Baptist I knew all the arguments against wine. Yet, as I read the Bible, substituting Welch's at the communion table seemed almost as heretical as sprinkling instead of immersing. Thus, even though wine had never passed my tender lips, I took my stand.

I knew we had a few fundamentalists left in the congregation. Among them was my wife who threatened, "Lips that touch wine shall never touch mine."

There was also the problem of where to purchase it. Should I run the risk of being spotted in the supermarket checkout line with a bottle of Mogen David hidden under the potato chips? Surely that was better than brown bagging out of the local liquor store.

"You've always said the character of a home could be determined by looking in the book case and the refrigerator," my wife argued. "Now you've degenerated to the state that you'd actually put wine in my kitchen."

It took a while, but she finally gave in. "I'll submit," she said at last, "but this will be the last straw for the Baptist remnant in the church.

They have stuck with you through speaking in tongues, healing, even casting out demons—but they'll draw the line at wine."

Fearing she might be right, I decided the first time out, to sneak up on them. I'd mix wine with grape juice.

The result was chaotic. The wine drinkers (who were in the majority in our congregation) were offended because we had diluted the Holy Communion. The teetotalers were furious because they could smell demon-alcohol in their sacred grape juice.

Instead of pleasing everybody, I had made the whole bunch as mad as hornets.

I learned several important lessons from that near disaster. First, that those who *insist* on wine because they are "free" in the Spirit, are just as bound to legalism as those who refuse to take it. A group should be free to take communion any way the Holy Spirit leads them. (I recently took communion with a group of charismatic pastors in Philadelphia where we ran out of wine and finished up with water. One pastor commented it was a teetotalers' miracle—changing wine into water).

Second, I learned that abstaining from meat to keep from offending my brother is more scriptural than insisting on the letter of the law. As a result we now serve grape juice

(which also is the fruit of the vine) in our larger groups. We let the smaller groups arrive at their own conclusions.

However, although one can argue for grape juice just as easily as for wine, compromise for the sake of placating both camps always results in a loss of power. In other words, even though Christians should be willing to compromise on personal beliefs when the situation demands it, it is impossible to cling to the old wineskins of tradition if we want to relate our patterns to the way Jesus did things.

A final lesson is equally important. No sheep is going to follow a shepherd who whistles an uncertain tune. If the shepherd is unsure, the sheep will always scatter. Jesus (and Paul) spoke with authority. They knew the way and commanded their followers to walk in it with them.

A pastor who tries to lead his flock into the fullness of the Holy Spirit, but who is fearful and tries to mix the new wine with the old grape juice, is courting disaster. Uncertainty, unwillingness to "go all the way" with the Holy Spirit causes far more division than the open expression of the gifts of the Spirit.

The Lord is looking for men today who will, in love, blow a clear note on the trumpet. Lukewarmness, which is a mixing of the hot and the cold, is always nauseating.