

PROPER ADMINISTRATION
OF THE LORD'S SUPPER: APPLYING
SCRIPTURE AND THE CONFESSIONS
TO CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

A Report of the Commission on Theology
and Church Relations

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

December 2025

Abbreviations

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| AC | Augsburg Confession |
| AE | Luther's Works |
| Ap | Apology of the Augsburg Confession |
| CW | Convention Workbook |
| FC SD | Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration |
| FC Ep | Formula of Concord, Epitome |
| LC | The Large Catechism |
| SA | Smalcald Articles |
| SC | The Small Catechism |



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PREFACE

At its 2023 convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) adopted Resolution 5-15, “To Uphold Proper Elements and Reverential Administration of the Lord’s Supper,” addressing concerns about the practice of the Lord’s Supper.¹ The resolution includes reminders that the Supper is “a communal meal . . . through which His body and blood are distributed in, with, and under bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.” The resolution goes on to reaffirm the confessional teaching “that the proper use of the Sacrament includes unified consecration, distribution, and reception” and the consequent fact that the Supper “should be kept according to His [Christ’s] institution.” It adds: “It is incumbent on all faithful ministers of the Gospel to remove all obstacles that create doubt regarding what Christ offers in this Sacrament or detracts from it.” Lastly, the final two “Whereas” statements speak about the use of “prefilled communion cup and wafer sets” and “the use of non-wheat hosts and/or grape juice” in LCMS congregations.

Three resolves follow:

Resolved, That our pastors and congregations give careful consideration to the reverential treatment of the elements in the administration of the Lord’s Supper; and be it further

Resolved, That this convention reaffirms 2001 Resolution 3-16, “To Encourage Use of Only Wine in Administration of Lord’s Supper”; and be it finally

Resolved, That the Commission on Theology and Church Relations [CTCR] be instructed to take up these concerns.

The following consideration is offered in compliance with the third and final

¹ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *2003 Convention Proceedings*, 157.

direction of 2023 Res. 5-15 and seeks to address the three specific “concerns” about the practice of the Lord’s Supper identified therein: first, the substitution of grape juice for wine; second, the use of prefilled communion cup and wafer sets; and third, the substitution of non-wheat for wheat hosts.

Each one of the three practices mentioned in 2023 Res. 5-15 has its rationale in pastoral concern for the well-being of communicants. Specifically, each addresses a matter of bodily health and well-being. Pre-packaged elements were introduced in some LCMS congregations during the COVID-19 pandemic as an attempt to protect communicants from transmission of the coronavirus. Churches that make grape juice available rather than wine do so to aid members who suffer from alcoholism or others who are on medications that should not be taken together with alcohol. And churches that offer gluten-free bread in the Supper do so to prevent adverse physical reactions to the gluten in wheat. It is important to acknowledge and commend the compassion and pastoral concern that these practices represent.

At the same time, appreciation of the compassion, motivations, and actions at work does not mean that we should ignore the theological appropriateness of these practices. Therefore, the CTCR seeks to address herein each of these practices from a confessional Lutheran theological and pastoral perspective. Our goal is that our practice would fully align with our confession of the Lord’s Supper as instituted by our Lord Jesus.

THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). As people hear and believe the Gospel’s promises they are sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13). We are saved by grace through faith in Christ. Holding to Christ in faith, we also hold to His promises. His promises are spoken that we may believe them and so receive what they promise: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Faith is thus confident hope. It is assurance that what God promises is ours, even when we do not see it (Heb. 11:1).

Among the precious expressions of the Gospel is the Sacrament of the Altar, where Christ explicitly promises that the bread of the Sacrament is His body and the cup of wine is His blood—and that this body was given for us and this blood was shed for the forgiveness of our sins. This is not “interpretation” but a simple acknowledgment of God’s Word:

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night when He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to the disciples and said: “Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me.”

In the same way also He took the cup after supper, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them saying, “Drink of it, all of you; this cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”²

² See “The Words of Our Lord,” or Words of Institution, as they appear in the Divine Service of *Lutheran Service Book* (Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 162, 179, 197, 209, 217.

This wonderful promise of the sacramental union and forgiveness in the Lord's Supper also has a sobering corollary: "We hold that the bread and wine in the Supper are Christ's true body and blood. These are given and received not only by the godly but also by wicked Christians" (SA III VI 1).³

Given these words, the Small Catechism simply and boldly restates them, confessing that the Sacrament of the Altar "is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and to drink, instituted by Christ Himself" (SC VI 2). The Formula adds the assurance that the words of Jesus are "simple, plain, clear, firm, and beyond doubt" (FC SD VII 48). Thus Lutherans make a confident confession, grounded in Christ's trustworthy promises. There is no doubt or quibbling or any attempt to rationalize how such a gift could be given. Faith does not demand an explanation; it receives and rejoices as it trusts in Christ's promises. Rather, Lutheran Christians firmly confess that the "true" body and blood—that is, the real, actual body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ—are what Christ gives Christians to eat and to drink. Any talk of Jesus' words as symbolic or mere figures of speech is ruled out. Thus the Formula of Concord echoes the Apology (X 54) to say, "We believe that in the Lord's Supper Christ's body and blood are *truly and substantially present* and are truly administered with those things that are seen (bread and wine) to those who receive the Sacrament" (FC SD VII 11; emphasis added).

All this is true, of course, not only of the Last Supper, but every Lord's Supper that follows Christ's intent. Paul's repetition of Christ's words in 1 Corinthians proves that they are rightly understood to apply not only to the bread and wine Christ distributed on the night of His betrayal, but are also true for the communion administration of the church in every age (see 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, especially 1 Cor. 10:16 and 1 Cor. 11:23–24; see also FC SD VII 54–55).

3 Therefore Lutherans do not administer the Sacrament without restriction to any and everyone. "Everyone who desires to be a Christian and go to this Sacrament should know them [the words of Christ]. For it is not our intention to let people come to the Sacrament and administer it to them if they do not know what they seek or why they come" (LC V 2). That the "unworthy" receive Christ's body and blood is taught in 1 Cor. 11:27–32.

The “word, institution, and ordination” of Christ creates the sacramental union (FC SD VII 73–75).⁴ And His “Do this” means the validity of the Sacrament also includes more than a mere recitation of Christ’s word over bread and wine. “This embraces the entire action or administration in this Sacrament. In an assembly of Christians bread and wine are taken, consecrated, distributed, received, eaten, drunk, and the Lord’s death is shown forth at the same time. St. Paul also places before our eyes this entire action of the breaking of bread or of distribution and reception (1 Corinthians 10:16)” (FC SD VII 84). This is summarized in the ancient rule that “nothing has the nature of a Sacrament apart from the use [*usus*] instituted by Christ or apart from the action [*actio*] divinely instituted” (FC SD VII 85). “The use or action here does not mean chiefly faith. Nor does it mean the oral participation alone. It means the entire external, visible action of the Lord’s Supper instituted by Christ: the consecration, or words of institution, the distribution and reception, or oral partaking of the consecrated bread and wine, of Christ’s body and blood” (FC SD VII 86).

Given the emphatic certainty of the Gospel in the words of Jesus when He instituted His Holy Supper, we should be concerned if any church practice fails to follow His institution or if it introduces doubt or uncertainty about the Supper. Instead, the church rightly seeks to follow our Lord’s own institution in Holy Communion. Just as our Lord took bread and wine, declaring it His body and blood and promising that “in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words” (SC VI 6), so we also echo His very words over bread and wine, distributing them in confident faith because He has declared that He wants to distribute His very body and blood in this way.

The clear words of Christ answer essential questions: “For Christ gives this command at the table and at supper. There is certainly no doubt that He speaks of real, natural bread and of natural wine. Also, He speaks of oral eating and drinking” (FC SD VII 48). Everything important is there in the Words of Institution. Because they are simple and clear and make unambiguous promises, our practice should avoid anything that takes the plain, powerful words of Jesus and produces questions or uncertainty, or leads to unhelpful, confusing, or illegitimate practices.

4 The Latin text reads, “*verbo, institutioni atque ordinationi*,” and the German, “*Wort, Einsetzung und Ordnung*.” See *Concordia Triglotta*, 999.

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That we seek to avoid ambiguity about the Sacrament, however, does not mean that every specific thing described in the Last Supper or in Paul's advice to Corinth must be followed in some kind of rigid mimicry. When Jesus said, "Do this," He focused on eating the bread that He promises is His very body and drinking the cup that He assures us is His very blood. Our Lord's emphasis is not on such things as the Passover setting or the physical action of breaking a loaf or other such matters. He tells us simply to eat and drink the bread and cup that are His body and blood—and thereby assures us that our sins are forgiven.

SUBSTITUTION OF GRAPE JUICE FOR ORDINARY WINE

This is not the place to trace the history of how and why grape juice came to be substituted for wine in the practice of Holy Communion.⁵ We should simply note that the practice came out of Methodist revivalism's condemnation of all alcohol use and was spurred by Thomas Welch's (a Methodist minister) development of a way to prevent the fermentation of grape juice through pasteurization.⁶

Over time the substitution of grape juice for wine was adopted by many Protestant churches and even by some LCMS congregations. Within the LCMS, however, this practice has not involved a total substitution of grape juice for wine. In such cases wine is used by most members and grape juice is available for alcoholics and others who avoid alcohol for medical reasons.

Although some LCMS congregations may in some situations substitute grape juice for wine in the Lord's Supper, the LCMS has taken a long-standing, consistent position against the practice. For this reason, although 2023 Res. 5-15 asked the CTCR to take up the three concerns we are addressing herein, the use of grape juice in place of wine can be considered most briefly. The resolution itself reaffirms a 2001 resolution that strongly encourages our congregations to use only wine and not grape juice (see Appendix A for the full text of 2001 Res. 3-16).

The Synod's position on this matter predates 2001 and is based firmly on Scripture. It is also consistent with the traditions of the church before the Reformation, of

5 A relatively brief history of the temperance movement in the US is available on the National Institutes of Health's National Library of Medicine. See Paul Aaron and David Musto, "Temperance and Prohibition in America: A Historical Overview," <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK216414/>.

6 See Joe Iovino, "Methodist History: Communion and Welch's Grape Juice," United Methodist Church, June 28, 2016, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/communion-and-welchs-grape-juice#:~:text=To%20combat%20the%20epidemic%20of,it%20is%20such%20common%20practice.>

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Luther and the Confessions, and of confessional Lutheran teachers who followed. Throughout this history the term “fruit of the vine” has been understood as a technical term and not a general description. The LCMS and its theologians have with great consistency affirmed that only bread and wine are to be used in the Lord's Supper. This position can be traced from C. F. W. Walther to Franz Pieper to the faculties of our seminaries to the CTCR.⁷

In 1998, the Synod convention affirmed this understanding in Res. 3-16B, “To Affirm Use of Bread and Wine in the Sacrament of the Altar.” In keeping with its title, the resolution included reminders that the Scriptures are unanimous in stating that our Lord used bread and a cup of wine in the Last Supper and that the same were present in the Sacrament at Corinth. Pastors were urged to “remain faithful in their practice of Christ's institution” so as “not to introduce an element of uncertainty into the Sacrament.”⁸

As noted in 2023 Res. 5-15, the Synod again addressed this topic in 2001, in Res. 3-16, “To Encourage Use of Only Wine in Administration of the Lord's Supper.” The convention then addressed congregations that were using grape juice: “That the congregations be encouraged to use only wine for the Sacrament.”⁹ Once more, in 2023 Res. 5-15, the Synod again reaffirmed its 2001 Res. 3-16 stance, “To Encourage Use of Only Wine in Administration of Lord's Supper.”¹⁰

We must add that this consistent position also indicates concern for the communicant who for various reasons cannot tolerate alcohol. The discussions of both seminaries and the CTCR all note the availability of low or non-alcoholic *wines* that may be used without objection.

7 See Walther's *Pastoral Theology* (Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 199; Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Concordia Publishing House, 1953), fns 94, 354; also “Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45, nos. 1-2 (1981): 77-80; “Is ‘Non-Alcoholic Wine’ Really Wine?” *Concordia Journal* 17, no. 1 (1991): 4-6; Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper* (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1983), under 2. The Elements, b. The Wine, 16-17.

8 See The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *1998 Convention Proceedings*.

9 See The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *2001 Convention Proceedings*.

10 *2023 Convention Proceedings*, 157.