UNFERMENTED WINE ON THE LORD'S TABLE: ORIGINS AND IMPLEMENTATION IN NINETEENTH CENTURY CANADIAN METHODISM

Doris I. Miller

Since the Union of the United Church of Canada in 1925, most congregations of this denomination have served unfermented communion wine. Currently, however, as the result of a number of factors including participation in the ecumenical liturgical reform movement and a desire to establish a less 'moralistic' image than was true of some Protestant churches in the past, this practice is being questioned and, in some instances, rejected. In the light of this trend, it is important to examine the roots of the unfermented wine tradition when considering whether the practice has continuing validity. Of the three major founding denominations of the United Church of Canada, Canadian Methodism provides a logical starting point for this investigation because of its numerical dominance at the time of Union and also because of Methodism's strong support for the temperance movement. Although some related work has been done in tracing the relationship between the Methodist position on temperance and the polity of The United Methodist Church, it does not appear that the particular question of how and when unfermented wine was introduced into communion services in Canadian Methodist churches has been explored in detail. Consequently, in this paper, an attempt will be made to identify and analyze factors which influenced the development and implementation of the policy of serving unfermented wine in the Lord's Supper in Methodist churches in Canada during the nineteenth century (Figure 1).

Before specifically addressing the question of wine on the Lord's Table, it is necessary to examine briefly the general social and religious context in which this became an issue. At the turn of the nineteenth cen-
Figure 1. The Union of Methodism into The Methodist Church (Canada, Newfoundland, Bermuda) in 1884.
Unfermented Wine on the Lord's Table

tury in Canada, the consumption of wine, beer and cider was not at all uncommon nor was their use condemned as was often the case for distilled liquors which had a considerably higher alcoholic content.

There was at first no suggestion of abstinence from wine, ale or beer; in fact, the use of these was encouraged, in the supposed interests of true temperance. Those who before long became convinced that the use of light liquor in moderation was a fatal cause of backsliding, met with bitter hostility from the moderates, and were accused of promulgating a dangerous doctrine. 3

Apparently some of these total abstainers were even refused insurance because they were considered 'subnormal.' And a letter published in the Canada Temperance Advocate, March 16, 1840 included the following statement from the Wesleyan Leaders’ Meeting in Montreal:

We deem it necessary to decide that no member of this meeting shall be allowed to agitate the question of temperance, especially in the extreme view of it called teetotalism of total abstinence, with the view of making it a church question or a test or condition of membership in our society. 4

While the drinking of beer and/or wine in moderation was viewed as being consistent with a position of temperance, the social and human cost linked with overindulgence in, and dependence upon, distilled liquor was recognized and deplored. In Great Britain and subsequently in the United States, these alcohol-related problems were exacerbated by urbanization and industrialization. John Wesley had early recognized and spoken out against the “new plague” brought about by the gin mills in the overcrowded industrial centers of Great Britain. 5 Although concern for controlling the liquor traffic was prominent among Methodists in Canada as well as in the United States and Great Britain, if statistics presented by Rowntree and Sherwell 6 can be taken as an indication (Table 1), the per capita consumption of beverage alcohol in all its forms was considerably lower in Canada with its relatively high rural population.

While Wesley condemned drunkenness and strongly opposed the use of distilled beverage alcohol (which he termed ‘spiritsuous liquors’) for anything except limited medicinal purposes, he himself was not a total

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3From an organizational chart developed by Neil Semple (1978), Research Tools 13, Methodism (Various Items), United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto, Ontario Canada.
7Burnett, “Methodist Origins.”
Table 1. Per capita consumption (gal.) of beverage alcohol during the 1894-1898 period.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Wine 12-15%</th>
<th>Beer 4-5%</th>
<th>Spirits 50%</th>
<th>Absolute Alcohol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>24.24</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>25.10</td>
<td>1.90</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>30.06</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>12.60</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

abstainer and was known to drink wine and ale on occasion.7 ‘Mr. Wesley’s Rule’ on temperance namely avoiding ‘drunkenness, buying or selling of spirituous liquors, or drinking them, except in cases of extreme necessity’ dating back to 1743 and included in Methodist Disciplines thereafter, thus originally referred to beverage alcohol of the distilled variety.8

In response to the social problems associated with the misuse of alcohol, temperance societies were established. The first in the British possession of North America was formed in 1827 in Bastard Township by a Methodist Episcopal clergyman.9 Societies in Beaver River, Nova Scotia and in Montreal were formed shortly thereafter in 1828.10 Annual Conferences of the various Methodist connections appointed standing committees on temperance and each local Methodist church was encouraged to form its own temperance society.

**Temperance as “Total Abstinence”**

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a significant shift in the temperance position became evident, a change reflected in successive modifications in the pledge of the Beaver River Temperance Society. Initially, each member promised to “forever renounce the use of ardent and distilled spirituous liquors in any kind except what may be taken as medicine in the case of sickness.” In 1830 this was revised to “consider the use of wine, except in the administration of the Lord’s Supper or sickness, a violation of the rules of the Society.” Subsequently, in 1851, the medicinal use of alcohol was more narrowly defined to “consider the use of any kind of spirituous liquors or wines as a medicine in case of sickness, except when prescribed by a physician, a violation of the rules of the Society.”11

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7Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada (1867), 72-73.
The reinterpretation of temperance from avoidance of hard liquor (i.e., 'ardent spirits' and 'spirituous liquors') and moderation in the use of beer and wine to mean total abstinence from all alcoholic beverages was not achieved without considerable resistance from within the ranks of the movement. But the 'teetotallers' (signifying the reduplication of the first 't' in total for the sake of emphasis) eventually won out based on arguments that beer and wine were not as innocent as once assumed and that their consumption often led to acquiring a 'taste' for hard liquor.  

In Canadian Methodism, the effect of this redefinition was to be found in the section of the *Discipline* dealing with the duties and responsibilities of ministers. In the 1829 and subsequent editions of *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada*, preachers had to answer the question: "Do you choose and use water for your common drink? And only take wine medicinally or sacramentally?" Similar statements can also be found in the *Discipline* of the other Methodist branches. The Minutes of 1862 Conference of the Primitive Methodist Church recorded that, "all Candidates for the Local Preachers' Plan [are] to be asked, 'Are you a total abstainer from all intoxicating drinks?' The answer must be in the affirmative, if the party be received." And the 1873 *Discipline* of that denomination included the statement that "it is earnestly recommended that our Ministers and Members abstain from using intoxicating Liquors, as a beverage."  

Within Methodism, intemperance was seen to be inconsistent with the 'fruits of the Spirit' and the process of sanctification. Therefore, concerted efforts were made to have first ministers, then church officials and finally all members of the Methodist connection be total abstainers from alcoholic beverages of all kinds including wine, beer and even home-made hard cider. An example of this sentiment is evident in the following excerpt from an 1872 Annual Conference temperance report:

> The Conference, deeply impressed with the conviction that intemperance is a sin against God, and most destructive to the best interests of our race, and that the use of alcoholic liquors, even in moderation, tends to the increase and perpetuation of drunkenness, — 

Resolves — (1.) That in view of this great evil, we would reiterate and earnestly enjoin upon all our people the most careful and conscientious observance of that rule given by the Rev. John Wesley to the societies under his care, viz: — "Neither buying or selling spirituous liquors, nor drinking them, unless in cases of extreme necessity." . . .

(3.) That as the Church of Christ should be the most effectual promoter of moral reform, we pledge ourselves to renewed efforts to purify and preserve her from reproach by discountenancing all complicity of her members with the great evil of intemperance, whether by drinking, manufacturing, selling, signing petitions for licence or furnishing or renting places for the sale of intoxicating liquors.  

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13 The *Discipline of the Primitive Methodist Church in Canada* (1873), 33.
14 Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Eastern British North America (1872), 49-50.
But while the use of wine as a beverage was condemned, as indicated by the wording of temperance pledges, sections regarding the duties of ministers in the *Disciplines* and reports of temperance committees at annual conferences, wine was still widely used in Canadian Methodist churches for sacramental purposes until at least the final quarter of the nineteenth century. What happened to change this practice?

**Removing Fermented Wine from the Lord’s Table**

Efforts to remove fermented wine from the Lord’s Table in Canadian Methodist churches occupied almost the entire last half of the nineteenth century. And the rationale for its removal appeared to center around two primary concerns. The first was ‘academic,’ denying that Jesus used fermented wine, while the second concern was ‘humanitarian,’ reflecting consideration for those with a weakness for alcohol. The London Conference gave voice to both these sentiments when, in the preamble to their 1880 resolution recommending the use of unfermented communion wine, they stated:

... in the opinion of this Conference, the use of alcoholic wine in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is an offence and stone of stumbling to many who are striving to live Christian lives; and, ... we believe the unfermented juice of the grape to be the wine in the sense in which that word is used in the Bible, and was used at the Passover and at the Lord’s Supper, both in its institution and observance by the primitive Christian church ...  

A report of a discussion on this topic which took place at the 1888 meeting of the Toronto Conference of the Methodist Church provides further insight into the pros and cons and the depth of feeling associated with this subject as well as something of its socio-political context.

It is important to note, however, that it was not until after the principles of total abstinence had been widely endorsed throughout Canadian Methodism that the question of New Testament accounts of Jesus’ use of wine arose. If, in fact, all intoxicating beverages were evil, as charged by the temperance advocates of the period, then how could Jesus have used alcoholic wine in the Last Supper? Such would have been clearly in-
consistent with their total abstinence position. In attempts to resolve this dilemma, post hoc appeals were made to Hebrew and Greek biblical texts to discover if the different words used for ‘wine’ carried variant meanings with respect to their state of fermentation. The argument was also put forth that, since the use of leaven was forbidden during Passover, and leaven was required in the fermentation process, Jesus would not have used fermented wine. Finally, the observation was made that in New Testament texts relating to the Lord’s Supper the word ‘wine’ was not mentioned but rather reference was made to ‘the cup’ and ‘the fruit of the vine.’ During the last decade of the century, temperance pamphlets entitled ‘Jewish Passover,’ ‘Bible Wines’ and ‘Alcoholic Wine on the Lord’s Table’ attempting to justify such interpretations were distributed to clergy by local Woman’s Christian Temperance Unions (WCTUs).

The position that Jesus must have used unfermented wine was not without considerable opposition not only from denominations who accepted wine as ‘one of God’s good gifts’ but also from within Methodism itself. These opponents held that, according to the customs of his time, Jesus must have used fermented wine both at the wedding feast at Cana and in the final Passover meal which he ate with his disciples. Consequently, for the most part, their view was that the sacrament was not valid unless fermented wine was used.

It is unclear how convincing the ‘academic’ argument of the temperance advocates was in changing attitudes regarding the nature of wine used in the Last Supper, but as the woman chairing the Unfermented Wine Department of the Quebec WCTU was to later report:

we are fully persuaded that the change will never be brought about through arguing about the different kinds of wine: but through Christian love, making them see the evil of placing a stumbling-block in the way of weak brethren, and to abstain just as Paul would have abstained from meat, where meat caused offence to his brethren.

“Wine at the Lord’s Supper,” Canada Christian Advocate, March 9, 1870, 1, col. 3.
21Ellis, The Fruit of the Vine, 80.
Richard M. Cameron, Methodism and Society in Historical Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961), 235.
24Report of the Dominion WCTU Convention (1892), 95.
Thus, for the WTCU and for many Methodists, the major concern for substituting unfermented wine in the Lord's supper was the 'humanitarian' one, to avoid putting temptation in the way of those who were struggling to maintain their sobriety consistent with the principles expounded by Paul in Romans 14:21. And, numerous examples were cited to support their contention that some individuals, as the result of partaking of alcoholic communion wine, had returned to heavy and uncontrolled drinking.25

Not all, however, were in sympathy with the situation faced by the problem drinker at communion. For example, one writer to the Christian Guardian commented that while "it is objected that reclaimed drunkards cannot safely taste wine in which there is alcohol . . . that is their cross and misfortune, a punishment for their past sin."26 Evidently, this individual did not believe that these exceptional cases should be allowed "to pervert the Lord's Supper." In attempting to dispel such misunderstandings, Youmans, who was a physician, explained that "in many cases, men are no more to blame for their appetite for strong drink than they are for suffering from cancer, or consumption."27

Placing Unfermented Wine on the Lord's Table

While some branches of the Methodist church connection in Canada recognized by the 1860s that fermented communion wine was problematic both on so-called 'academic' and 'humanitarian' grounds, a major obstacle was what to use in its place. As the 1857 temperance report of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Canada stated: "If a good article could be obtained for the sacrament, your committee would consider it a great boon to the christian community."28 The difficulty, however, lay in controlling the fermenting action of wild yeasts on the skins of grapes. It was not until the 1850s that Louis Pasteur clarified the problem and provided a potential solution.29 Still, it took time to put theory into practice and to develop a good quality product which could be purchased at a reasonable price.30 In the meantime, various alternatives were tried with unsatisfactory results. For example, some congregations used the juice of stewed

Ellis, The Fruit of the Vine, 77.
27Youmans, "Sacramental Wine Again."
28Minutes of the Annual Conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church in Canada, Niagara and Bay of Quinte Conferences (1857), 15.
raisins.\footnote{M., “Sacramental Wine,” \textit{Christian Guardian}, April 14, 1880, 118, col. 5-6.} \textit{The Christian Guardian} of the period published numerous recipes for making unfermented communion wine with instructions on how it was to be stored to prevent spoilage.\footnote{G. M. B., “Sacramental Wine,” \textit{Christian Guardian}, September 22, 1880, 302, col. 6; 303, col. 1.} As early as 1876, an advertisement for ‘pure grape wine unfermented for sacramental purposes’ appeared in \textit{The Christian Guardian and Evangelical Witness}. When such commercial outlets were found, congregations were requested to band together to submit bulk orders.\footnote{C. Teeter, “Unfermented Wine,” \textit{Christian Guardian}, September 17, 1884, 313, col. 2, 1884.}

Any consideration of this subject, however, would be incomplete without mention of Welch’s grape juice. As C. E. Welch indicated in his last will and testament: “Unfermented grape juice was born in 1869 out of a passion to serve God by helping His Church to give its communion ‘the fruit of the vine,’ instead of the ‘cup of devils.’”\footnote{M. Youmans, “Communion Wine—Good and Without Alcohol,” \textit{Christian Guardian}, September 22, 1880, 302, col. 6.} His father, T. B. Welch, a devout Methodist, having witnessed the relapse of a visiting minister into heavy drinking after taking wine at communion, resolved to find a substitute for sacramental wine. This he was later able to do using Pasteur’s technique. While ‘Dr. Welch’s Unfermented Wine’ was advertised in \textit{The Christian Advocate} in 1875 ‘for the sacrament and for medicinal use,’ its adoption was not immediate. Eventually, however, it was accepted and, at least by 1897 according to its advertising, Canada had become one of its markets.

Although pure unfermented grape juice was available at a reasonable cost by 1882,\footnote{Youmans, “Sacramental Wine Again.”} it was still not widely used as evidenced in annual reports of Methodist temperance committees. While it is difficult to quantify the extent of WCTU influence on the eventual widespread adoption of unfermented wine in the communion services of Methodist churches, it is likely that WCTU had a major impact. Among the leadership and membership of this politically powerful organization, there had to be a significant representation of women who were Methodists.

As early as 1879, the Ontario WCTU resolved to “appoint a committee to secure as far as possible the use of the juice of the grape instead of fermented wine at the Lord’s Table.”\footnote{T. C. Watkins, “Unfermented Wine,” \textit{Christian Guardian}, October 13, 1886, 644, col. 1.} The fact that their efforts were felt in the Primitive Methodist Church is witnessed by the report of its temperance committee in 1883 in which the statement was made that:}\footnote{M. Youmans, “Communion Wine-Good and Without Alcohol,” \textit{Christian Guardian}, September 22, 1880, 302, col. 6.}
we also think the Conference will do wisely to attempt the carrying out of the request
of the ‘Ontario Womens’ Christian Temperance Union,’ in reference to prohibition
(as far as possible) of all alcoholic wines from the Lord’s-table in our Church, and
by kindly asking our people to substitute the pure juice of the grape for sacramental
use.37

But, nevertheless, according to McKee, at the 1885 Ontario WCTU
Convention:

the old fight was still on for Temperance textbooks in the schools, and for unfermented
wine at the Lord’s Table. In several places, this latter fight was won through a secret
agreement that all members of the Union would pass ‘The Cup’ untasted until their
plea that the Blood of Christ should not be represented by that which was one of
the world’s greatest curses, was heeded.38

At the second convention of the Dominion WCTU (est. 1883) held
in 1889, a Department for Unfermented Wine was added to the organiza-
tion structure and it was resolved “that the members of this Union, regret-
ting the use of fermented wine at the Lord’s Table, do earnestly pray that
His ministers do carefully consider the expediency of substituting that
which is unfermented for sacramental purposes.” At the Third Conven-
tion in 1890, it was recommended that, “each Union appoint a superinten-
dent or committee to wait on the ministers and church officials in their
locality, and offer to furnish at the lowest rates the ‘pure juice of the grape’
for sacramental purposes” and further that “each W.C.T.U. woman, make
this department a specialty and cause her individual influence to be felt
in the church of her choice, by cautiously, and lovingly, agitating for the
introduction of unfermented wine at the Holy sacrament.”39

In the 1890 edition of The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist
Church a sentence was added to the section dealing with the Lord’s Sup-
per which stated that “in the public administration of the Lord’s Supper
non-alcoholic wines shall be used whenever possible.”40 This new state-
ment of official church policy may have facilitated the efforts of local
WCTUs. In any case, according to the Dominion WCTU minutes, by 1891
all Methodist churches in British Columbia were reportedly using
unfermented wine and, in 1892, such was also the situation in Methodist
churches in the maritime provinces.41 In 1894, Ontario indicated compli-
ance by all Methodist, Baptist and Congregational churches and, by 1897,
unfermented wine was being used in all Protestant churches in Quebec
in towns having WCTUs.42 Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century,

37Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Primitive Methodist Church, Report of the
Temperance Committee (1883), 15.
38S. G. E. McKee, Jubilee history of the Ontario Woman’s Christian Temperance Union
41The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Church (1890), Section IV The Lord’s Sup-
per, following Article 40.
42Reports of the Dominion WCTU Conventions (1891-1897).
it appeared that the practice of serving unfermented wine in the Lord's Supper in Canadian Methodist churches had been effectively implemented.

Conclusions

The movement to replace fermented with unfermented wine on the Lord's Table in Canadian Methodist churches had both its major origins and its eventual widespread implementation in the second half of the nineteenth century. Was the underlying motivation an attempt to remove the final bastion of what was viewed as "the most active and fatal agent of the devil" since even the Canada Temperance Act of 1878 made provision for the sale of liquor for sacramental purposes, or was the motivation to eliminate "a temptation to some who formerly used intoxicating drinks to return to their habits again"? In fairness, it must be admitted that both sentiments were strongly represented in the movement. And while it is true that efforts to eliminate alcoholic communion wine post-dated the Methodist espousal of total abstinence, it must also be recognized that, until the discovery of pasteurization and the subsequent efforts of those such as T. B. Welch, a suitable substitute for fermented communion wine was not available. Thus the recognition of the problem preceded practical means of solution by approximately a quarter of a century. But despite the later availability of good quality unfermented wine and ecclesiastical support in the form of Annual Conference recommendations and the eventual official policy statement of The Methodist Church to use non-alcoholic communion wine whenever possible in the public administration of the Lord's Supper, it is unlikely that this practice would have been implemented as effectively had it not been for the untiring efforts of hundreds of Canadian Methodist women acting through their local WCTUs. It was their practical socio-political power which, in all probability, brought the movement to fruition before the turn of the twentieth century.

With regard to the contemporary situation, many things have of course changed. It is no longer considered appropriate nor desirable to enforce one's personal or denominational 'morality' on the population at large. We recognize the pluralistic nature of our society. On the other hand, we now have a more detailed understanding of the widespread disease of alcoholism than did our nineteenth century forbears. Thus, the question to be raised in our current context is whether the concern for the 'weaker brother' addressed as a part of the nineteenth century unfermented wine movement is still a valid one which in some way needs to be accommodated in modern eucharistic practice beyond simply providing the option of 'receiving in only one kind.'

\[43\] "Cup of Bacchus."

\[44\] Rountree and Sherwell, The Temperance Problem and Social Reform, 325.

\[45\] Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church (1857), 15.