

# Department of Liturgics

## Commission on Worship

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### **What should people with allergies to alcohol or gluten do about Holy Communion?**

In the words of institution the church learns from Christ himself what Holy Communion is and how it should be administered. Jesus took bread and wine, said ‘this is my body’ and ‘this is my blood’, and gave them to his disciples to eat and drink ‘for the forgiveness of sins’. The church has always understood these words to mean that we should use both bread and wine and not merely one element or the other. It has also understood these words to mean that we are not free to substitute the bread or the wine with alternative elements.

Given this understanding, the question arises as to what the church should do if a communicant is found to be allergic to one or the other element used in communion. If we can only use the elements Jesus used, namely, wheaten bread and fermented grape wine, does that mean that whoever has an allergy to one of these substances must either suffer the physical reaction or else do without communion altogether?

This question is an old one. Lutheran theologians over the centuries have always emphasised the pastoral concern that, for the sake of faith and a good conscience (1 Tim 1:19), we should abide by the clear command and institution of Christ. We should beware of easy solutions invented by human reason that, wittingly or unwittingly, call the certain word of Christ into question and dissolve the sure foundation for faith.

If we follow this principle, it means that we are not at liberty to replace bread and wine with alternative elements. The point of using bread and wine is not to use something that represents or signifies Christ’s body and blood. In that case, alternative symbols would do. Rather, they serve the purpose of communicating Christ’s body and blood. Their use is determined not by their symbolic value or representative likeness, but by the command of Christ.

However, when it comes to *the kind of bread or wine to be used*, here there is freedom. There is no divine command as to what kind of bread and wine one should actually use in the Lord’s Supper. Wine may be white or red, of any kind of vintage, as long as it is made from fermented, crushed grapes. And although it is likely Jesus used unleavened bread, the church is not bound to use the same kind of bread. It may be leavened or unleavened, brown or white, as long as it is baked from flour. Today we have flour made not only from wheat, oats and barley, but also gluten free seeds such as corn, soy, or even rice. Likewise today we have fermented, but subsequently de-alcoholised, wine.

We may draw a number of conclusions for pastoral practice:

- First, we should avoid using grape juice as a substitute for wine (see the FAQ on this). Fortified wines could be replaced by wines with lower alcohol levels. Communing by intinction further keeps the alcohol intake to a bare minimum.
- Second, due to the increasing numbers of communicants presenting with gluten intolerance, congregations might look at using soy or rice-based ('gluten free') wafers. But they should only do so if the individuals concerned, the pastor, and the whole congregation are satisfied that they really constitute 'bread'.
- Finally, a short-term solution has sometimes been to invite allergy affected people to commune under one kind only (to take only the bread or only the wine). But this is probably not the best long-term solution. According to Christ's word both elements should be used, not one or the other. In those situations where, for whatever reason, one or the other element cannot be consumed, the Lutheran theologians of the past have wisely advised that it is better to do without the sacrament than to deviate from the ordinance of Christ. In such cases the faith-filled desire for the sacrament is efficacious to salvation.