

Water to Wine – To Water Again?

By Christine Comiskey

As Christians, we are probably all familiar with the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding feast. But did you know that our church once tried to do just the opposite?

There existed within our church membership a few persons who clearly had alcohol abuse problems, as evidenced by their confessions in the church record books. Other members took pity on their plight and offered a resolution to help keep them from temptation—a resolution which would also satisfy those involved in the popular Temperance movement.

The following is an example of how our predecessors could take a simple resolution and turn it into a months-long (and probably heated) debate:

2/13/1874 *The following preamble and resolution were presented to the church:*

Whereas we feel that it is a part of the duty of members of the church to be careful not to place a cause of offence or a stumbling block, or an occasion to fall in the way of a brethren or sister; and Whereas we feel that there may be something in the nature, or in the name of wine in any form that may be a temptation to some brethren or sister;
Therefore – Resolved – that this the First Congregational Church in Georgetown discontinue the use of wine at the communion and in its place substitute pure water.

After some talk of the above, it was voted that it be laid over for one week.

2/20/1874 *The church remained after the weekly meeting when the above resolution was again read and some expressed their minds upon it, when it was voted that it still be deferred another week.*

2/27/1874 *Voted that the resolution under discussion be deferred until the next monthly meeting.*

3/13/1874 *The members of the church remained after the usual service of the week, and the resolution on the use of wine at the communion was brought up, and after some discussion, on motion of Deacon Moses Merrill it was voted that this question be deferred until Fast Day.*

4/2/1874 *It being Fast Day, the church remained after the prayer meeting of the afternoon, when the resolution on the use of wine at the communion was brought up for discussion. When after some discussion it was voted that when the vote on the resolution of changing the use of wine to water is taken, it to be by Yea and Nay*

(Wow, they finally agreed on SOMETHING!)

6/9/1874 *At the monthly meeting of the church, it was voted that the resolution which has been under discussion be laid upon the table until the next monthly meeting.*

7/14/1874 *At a meeting of the church this day held, it was voted that the vote of the resolution of substituting water for wine at the communion be taken by a vote by Yea and Nay at the next communion without discussion.*

9/6/1874 *The vote on the resolution of substituting pure water for wine was taken by Yes and No which resulted in 24 votes Yes and 40 voting No.*

YES and NO? I thought they agreed on Yea and Nay! Anyway, after eight meetings and nearly seven months – nothing changed! Tradition triumphed over Temperance.

So when did we finally decide to use grape juice?

As the congregation debated the question of substituting water for wine, they were not yet aware of a product developed by a New Jersey dentist in 1869. A staunch supporter of the Temperance Movement and a communion steward in his church, he developed a way to pasteurize grape juice to keep it from fermenting. He began making his Unfermented Sacramental Wine for churches in and around his home-town but it would be many years before

he began large scale marketing of his product. In 1893, Dr. Thomas Welch and his son, Dr. Charles Welch, gave up their New Jersey dental practices and founded *Welch's Grape Juice Company*. Thousands were able to sample the juice at the World's Fair in Chicago. They began widely marketing the juice to temperance-minded Protestant churches as a non-alcoholic alternative to sacramental wine. It was probably around that time that our church made the switch from wine to *Welch's Grape Juice* (oddly enough, there is no mention of the change in our church records). The idea would have appealed to the traditionalists—it was still from *the fruit of the vine*, the Temperance folks would approve of its lack of alcohol, and those with a weakness for alcohol would not be lead into temptation. A win-win situation all around! Thank you, Dr. Welch!