

IS IT WRONG TO DRINK ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES? THE BIBLE'S POSITION ON TOTAL ABSTINENCE

We know the Bible denounces drunkenness: “Be not drunk with wine” (Eph. 5:18). The Book of Galatians proclaims the sinful works of the flesh and included on the list is drunkenness (Gal. 5:19-21). The Bible is clear on drunkenness: it is sin! No one argues this, but many ask, “Can I drink in moderation?” Does God approve of the use of any alcoholic beverage? The answer is no: the Bible teaches total abstinence. For the majority of this nation’s history, Christians have been of the same mind when it comes to alcohol. In our day, however, many evangelicals argue for the right to drink in moderation, and consequently believers are perplexed with many questions concerning God’s view on alcohol.

Some will argue that the Bible seems to endorse alcohol as long as one does not get drunk. This has led to an established practice of “social drinking” amongst believers. There is definite confusion among Christians. Many question how the Bible can seemingly be both for and against the use of alcohol. Is it a question of how much? Too much is wrong and a little is acceptable in moderation? At times the Bible seems to be inconsistent. Prov. 20:1 condemns alcohol and Ps. 104 says that wine is a gift from God. Which one is correct? Robert P. Teachout, in his book *Wine – The Biblical Imperative: Total Abstinence*, addressed this same question: “How can the Bible both totally and unreservedly condemn wine for man’s use and totally and unreservedly recommend wine

for man’s use? How can one drink be both commended and condemned—be both good and evil?”¹

The vineyard was blessed by God for the use of providing food and drink for the family. When the Bible refers to wine, that wine is not always alcoholic. The generic term for wine is the fruit of the vine. We would call it grape juice. How can we tell when the Bible says *wine* if it is referring to the nonalcoholic or alcoholic kind? We can know from the context of the passage whether it refers to the alcoholic beverage or not.

Teachout further explained: “God is totally consistent in both the Old and New Testament. He never disapproves of grape juice and He never approves of wine.”²

Teachout continued: “In any amount, wine is condemned and drinking it is disobedience. Whenever the word ‘wine’ occurs in the Bible and it is in a context of divine approval, it is referring to grape juice. However, whenever it is mentioned in a context of disapproval, it is speaking of fermented wine. Therefore, these passages must be read with careful thought so that one never interprets the text in such a way as to make God inconsistent. God always approves of juice; He never recognized [alcoholic] wine as anything good but only as a perversion of His gift to man.”³

The book by Peter Masters entitled, *Should Christians Drink? The Case for Total Abstinence*, gave this explanation “Nothing could be plainer than the emphatic command of Prov. 23:19-20, ‘Be not among winebibbers,’ which is an absolute prohibition from

¹Robert P. Teachout, *Wine - The Biblical Imperative: Total Abstinence* (Columbia, S.C.: Richbarry Press, 1983), 13.

²Ibid., 16.

³Ibid., 30.

going into drinking establishments (taverns and bars).”⁴ The Bible teaches us to avoid evil company because evil associations will corrupt good morals. Winebibbing friends can cause one to join in on the consumption. We are to remove ourselves from people who love to drink. Neither should we go to a place where they are located. “Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation” (1 Thess. 5:6-8). The word *sober* means to be free from anything that would dull ones’ senses or mental alertness. God wants us to be sober minded, self-controlled, under the influence of the Holy Spirit and His Bible.

The Bible reveals some results from drinking in Prov. 23:29-35. In this passage, we learn that alcohol has a train of evil attached to it. In the first portion of verse 29, we see the emotional problems for those that play with alcohol: “Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow?” This refers to the misery incurred for the individual and the family of those that consume alcohol. The Bible says that “the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty” (Prov. 23:21). Alcohol promises good cheer but sends sorrow.

Alcohol also brings about relational problems: “Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling?” (Prov. 23:29). Drinking alcohol results in foolish talking bringing forth strife. The individual becomes argumentative and belligerent to others, often leading to physical confrontations. Verse 29 states that alcohol brings physical problems. “Who hath wounds? Who hath redness of eyes?” One who consumes alcohol may find himself wounded, and not know where their wounds came from. Alcohol causes dizziness,

⁴Peter Masters, *Should Christians Drink? The Case for Total Abstinence* (London: Wakeman Trust, 1992), 28.

staggering, and it effects balance and motor skills. Alcohol makes it difficult for an individual to walk, work, or even speak. Jerry Dunn correctly explained, “The anesthetic effect of alcohol slows man’s reactions measurably. It decreases his ability to judge distances and to tell the difference between visual and auditory stimuli.”⁵ The consumption of alcohol produces such detrimental consequences to an individual and those around him. Why would any believer chose to participate in a potential activity with such devastating results?

All of these troubles are associated with those that “tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine” (Prov. 23:30). His mouth shall also utter foolish and inappropriate remarks including distasteful and incoherent words: “And thine heart shall utter perverse things” (Prov. 23:33). The drinker makes a fool out of himself and then he has no memory of it.

This passage continues its description of those that partake in alcohol: “Thine eyes shall behold strange women” (Prov. 23:33). This verse indicates that an individual involved with alcohol has the tendency to be drawn toward immoral persons which oftentimes leads to immorality. When a person consumes alcohol, they lose inhibition. Dr. John R. Rice wrote: “Alcohol stirs the sexual appetite and leads people to do what they would not do otherwise. Liquor and immorality go regularly together then and now.”⁶

⁵Jerry Dunn and Bernard Palmer, *God Is for the Alcoholic: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 26

⁶John R. Rice, *The Double Curse of Booze* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1960), 12.

The Bible clearly warns us: “Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth its color in the cup, when it moveth itself aright.” (Prov. 23:31). Wine looks attractive, and it may be perceived as a status symbol, but “at the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder” (Prov. 23:32). In the end, alcohol is as devastating and painful as a snake bite. No believer should engage himself with what God has called a venomous snake.

At the end of this passage is the most devastating verse of them all: “They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not. When shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.” (Prov. 23:35). Alcohol is addictive. After enduring great physical harm, a person will foolishly consume alcohol all over again. John R. Rice laments: “One of the most pitiful things is a man who drinks and drinks and cannot or will not quit.”⁷ The Book of Proverbs warns of the effects that may result from alcohol.

Alcohol affects the personality, changing the way people behave, making fools out of them. The Bible says, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise” (Prov. 20:1). Teachout explains, “The text specifically indicates that wine itself is a ‘mocker’ without mention of the quantity involved. Note that this is an indictment by God on the beverage, not merely the drinking of it.”⁸ This verse also mentions that strong drink makes an individual aggressive. An intoxicated person often becomes involved in activities they would not normally attempt. God’s

⁷Ibid., 13.

⁸Teachout, *Wine – The Biblical Imperative*, 12.

warning in this verse concludes with the admonition that whoever does not believe this is deceiving himself and is not wise.

Many people try to condone the consumption of alcohol by pointing to the miracle in John 2 when Jesus turned water into wine. Did Jesus turn the water into an alcoholic beverage at the wedding feast in Cana? The Bible records that the wine ran out, and that Jesus miraculously made more. The Greek word for *wine* used in this passage is *oinos*, and it can have a host of meanings ranging from a grape to a fermented alcoholic beverage. The wedding host said that the quality of the wine that Jesus created was better. The best juice is the newest and freshest juice. Samuel Bacchiocchi, in his book *Wine in the Bible*, explains that “Scriptural and moral consistency requires that ‘the good wine’ produced by Christ was fresh, unfermented grape juice. This is supported by the very adjective used to describe it, namely *kalos*, which denotes that which is morally excellent, instead of *agathos*, which means simply good.”⁹ Jesus simply replenished their exhausted supply of grape juice.

Bacchiocchi also correctly concluded that “those who wish to insist that the wine used at the feast was alcoholic and that Jesus also provided alcoholic wine, though of a better quality, are driven to the conclusion that Jesus provided a large additional quantity of intoxicating wine so that the wedding party could continue its reckless indulgence. Such a conclusion destroys the moral integrity of Christ’s character.”¹⁰ Would Christ create a beverage causing people to become drunk? Hab. 2:15 says, “Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and makest him drunken also.” Would Jesus Christ do such a thing? Yet this is what many who want to socially drink

⁹Samueal Bacchiocchi, *Wine in the Bible* (Evanston, Ill.: Signal Press, 1989), 43.

¹⁰Ibid.

accuse him of. The Lord Jesus Christ would never help people to sin by providing an intoxicating wine.

Oftentimes 1 Tim. 5:23 is given as a proof text for drinking in moderation. The Apostle Paul instructed Pastor Timothy: “Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake and thine often infirmities.” In examining this verse closely, three conclusions can be drawn. First, this verse indicates that Timothy was a total abstainer of wine. The apostle Paul has to order Timothy to partake because evidently he did not drink alcohol. Paul also addressed how much wine Timothy was to consume. He was to take “a little,” literally a puny amount. Finally, we see that the purpose of the wine was medicinal. This verse certainly cannot be used to teach moderation or social drinking. The wine advocated by Paul in this passage was not being used as a beverage but as a medicine and in a very small amount.

Another misunderstood passage is Prov. 31:4-6: “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes strong drink, Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that are of heavy hearts.” Teachout explained that “the verse states that the only possible benefit would be for those who are dying in misery.”¹¹ Once again, this is referring to the sedative effect of alcohol used as a medicinal purpose. Kings and princes were commanded to abstain, partly because of their high responsibilities, as well as providing an example to their people. The priests were also forbidden strong drink when officiating in the tabernacle and when they were ministering to the people (Lev. 10.9-10). The penalty for drinking was death for the

¹¹Ibid., 65-66.

priest. People in leadership must be able to make good judgments and decisions without being impaired by alcohol.

What about the use of alcoholic drink in the Lord's Supper? Many churches use alcoholic beverages during the Communion service. Is this in accordance with God's Word? The clear implication from Scripture is that the drink was grape juice and not wine. The Bible is very careful and precise when in reference to Communion by never even saying or using the word wine; it says the cup or fruit of the vine. Charles Ewing states emphatically in his book *The Bible and Its Wines* that "you can not find one place in the New Testament where the word 'wine' is used in connection with the last supper."¹²

These biblical texts, given by those who desire to prove that alcohol consumption is acceptable, cannot be used as a stamp of approval upon social drinking. We need to heed the warnings of the Bible: "Woe unto them who rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; who continue until night, till wine inflames them!" (Isa. 5:11). "Woe unto them who call evil, good, and good, evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! Woe unto them who are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink" (Isa. 5:20-22).

Referring to moderate drinking, Russell Kelfer explained the importance of not drinking any alcoholic beverage. Kelfer said drunkenness is "to be intoxicated to the point of impairment, and impairment being defined as that which weakens, diminishes, or

¹²Charles Wesley Ewing, *The Bible and Its Wines*, 4th ed. (Dayton, Ohio: Charles Wesley Ewing Publisher, 1963), 15.

lessens in strength, value, quantity, and quality.”¹³ When does this occur? On the very first drink. According to Kelfer, drunkenness is “a process, a progressively deteriorating process that impairs or makes one less effective. And in any stage of that process that you become less effective, you are to that degree intoxicated.”¹⁴ Modern scientific research determined, according to their Alcohol Impairment Chart, that “impairment begins with your first drink.”¹⁵ The first drink, according to John R. Rice, has an affect: “The first glass is the part that begins to destroy the fine appreciation, the inhibition that keeps you from doing wrong, the sense of responsibility that makes you bring home your paycheck, makes you take care of your children. That part that makes you respect virtue, that makes you tell the truth, that keeps you out of crime—that part is dead first, doped first, and cursed first.”¹⁶ Jerry Dunn, in his book *God Is for the Alcoholic*, gives the scientific explanation that “ethyl alcohol, when taken into the body, goes almost immediately into the bloodstream and up to the brain. It begins to affect the cortex of the brain, the location of higher brain centers that have to do with memory, conscience, and judgment.”¹⁷ Ethyl alcohol is commonly known as ethanol. It is the same product used to fuel vehicles. It is flammable, colorless, and it is slightly toxic, and yet people drink it. Jerry Dunn explained that “all alcoholic beverages—wine, beer, or whiskey—contain ethyl alcohol, a

¹³Russell Kelfer, “Be Not Drunk . . . Be Filled” (sermon online published by Discipleship Tape Ministries, 2006); accessed 23 Jan. 2007 <<http://www.dtm.org/lessons/915b.html>>.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Alcohol Impairment Chart: National Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information: Pennsylvania Control Board; accessed 31 Dec. 2007 <[http://www.ctclearinghouse.org/topics/customer-files/Alcohol-Impairment-Chart-\(revised-062304\).pdf](http://www.ctclearinghouse.org/topics/customer-files/Alcohol-Impairment-Chart-(revised-062304).pdf)>.

¹⁶John R. Rice, *The Double Curse of Booze*, 12.

¹⁷Jerry Dunn, *God is for the Alcoholic*, 26.

habit-forming drug.”¹⁸ Why is social drinking so dangerous? It is the doorway to addiction.

A drink from the devil is in our land, and it is called beer, wine, liquor, champagne, wine coolers, and hard lemonade. It can be consumed and dressed up in many ways, but it is a destroyer nonetheless. Alcohol brings about so much evil and harm. It is one of Satan’s devices, and we should not be deceived. The moment we have decided to drink we have made a bad decision. Alcohol consumption is a problem; it was a problem for Noah and Lot. It stands without question that the use of alcohol has ruined countless lives. The Bible clearly teaches us to abstain from all appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:22), and we ought to avoid alcoholic beverages altogether. The Bible clearly speaks to its consequences and its ultimate destruction. It is a poor testimony and can lead to great failures in life. As a Christian, drinking alcohol is not only unwise, but it is forbidden.

¹⁸Ibid., 17.