

The Bible and Alcohol

by

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Introduction¹

In a recent letter, a visitor to the Biblical Studies Foundation web site asked, “Could you help explain whether the Bible promotes drinking alcohol or whether it condemns it.”

This is obviously a concern to many Christians—and for good reason! With the rampant abuse of alcohol in this country, resulting in shattered lives and tens of thousands of deaths each year, any person with a conscience should be deeply concerned about this issue. However, caution is also needed in a different direction: too often Christians have moral outrage because of abuses of one of God’s gifts—outrage that leads to a condemnation of those who are *not* abusers. Things that once were issues are often now regarded as normal activities. For example, when my grandmother and grandfather were dating, her parents were concerned about this young man because he liked to go to football games. That was taboo for them. Some Christians have condemned others for wearing make-up, going to the opera, or even sending Christmas cards. Christians, it seems, have an incredible ability to invent rules and regulations. It’s endemic to human nature—but it’s also a modern, unvarnished form of Pharisaism.

Our attitude toward alcohol may well be conditioned by our culture more than we realize. Since the days of Prohibition, many believers have simply assumed that partaking of alcoholic beverages was sinful. What is interesting is that in many other countries God-fearing Christians see no problem with alcoholic beverages. (When I was on sabbatical in England, for example, I heard the pastor at an evangelical church use an illustration which involved alcohol in a positive light. He was speaking about our attitude toward little disasters—such as when one brings home the groceries and the one sack that had the Sherry in it falls to the ground and the Sherry bottle breaks! The very casualness of this illustration put in bold relief the difference in attitude between many American Christians and many European Christians regarding alcoholic beverages. If a pastor in the States were to use the same illustration, most churches would censure him for it if not outright sack him.)

One question we must wrestle with is this: If there is a subcultural Christian prohibition that goes beyond scripture, are we obligated to follow it? Should we even endorse it? Ignore it? Fight against it? As we all know, there are numerous Christian taboos that go beyond scripture, depending on when and where one lives. Perhaps this one can be seen as paradigmatic for how to treat the others.

At all points, we must seek to be biblical. This requires resisting the temptation to go beyond what the Bible restricts. As I began to look into this topic, I was actually quite amazed at the biblical writers’ attitude toward alcohol. I had expected it to be far more negative than it really was. One lesson I have learned from this is that although I *think* that I am being biblical, often my tradition and Christian subculture shape my thinking more than I realize.

Preliminary Framework: Grey Areas

A word should be said about grey areas to begin with. Some Christians view grey areas as those moral zones in which one believer has the right to brow-beat another. Thus, if one believer thinks it is wrong for another to go to football games, the first believer has the right to exercise judgment on the second. This ‘sin-sniffing’ delves

¹ The reader may wish to consult my essay, “1 Thessalonians 5:22—The Sin-Sniffer’s Catch-All Verse: ‘Avoid Every Appearance of Evil’” to get a broader based treatment on the issue of grey areas in the Christian life.

into all areas, and the things that get lumped into this cauldron of evil deeds are quite numerous: attending the opera, playing cards, attending *any* kind of motion pictures, owning a television, listening to rock or country-western or even Mozart, investing in the stock market, observing Christmas with a decorated tree, reading mystery novels, spouses having separate checking accounts, women wearing make-up or slacks, etc. What all these areas have in common is that they are not discussed in scripture. Thus, if one wants to label them as evil, he either has to do some rather ingenious interpretation of the Bible or else simply appeal to one's conscience as the standard by which others are to be measured.

We all can see the ludicrousness of such a stance when it comes to grey zones that are inoffensive to *me*. But when there is something that I have found offensive, the natural tendency is for me to make sure everyone else around me abides by the same rules.

One of the hallmarks of modern American Christianity is its preoccupation with a 'formula faith.' Tremendously popular are conferences that address conflicts between parents and youth and how to resolve them. One well-known such conference turns (occasionally) good advice into hundreds of rules that can suffocate one's walk with God. We are enamored of the 'How to' books that work for others and *perhaps* may work for us. All too often, once a person has found a tailor-made Bible-reading schedule, or a tailor-made pattern of prayer or diet or method of raising children or love-making technique, he writes a book about it and proclaims its universal applicability and even its normativeness. The reason such sells? Because legalism is endemic to human nature. We can package such as 'practical Christianity' or 'a wise and godly lifestyle' or 'principles to live by,' but at bottom when such advice goes beyond the scriptures and turns into more than advice, it is legalism. Such a preoccupation with legalism is seen in church membership requirements, missionary and pastoral ordination bodies, and Bible college/seminary codes of conduct. Take a look at a catalog of almost any evangelical institute of higher learning. You will notice that all too often the code of conduct section will spend an inordinate amount of space making grey areas taboo while spending almost no space articulating what the Bible declares to be sinful behavior.

Church historian M. James Sawyer recently spoke at the western regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on *Sola Scriptura* in the Protestant tradition. In his lecture he noted the irony of the modern milieu:

Among contemporary denominations we find statements such as that of the [denomination's name withheld], who in their licensing and ordination questionnaire asks candidates if they agree that the Bible is the 'only and infallible rule of faith and practice' for the believer. (The questionnaire on the very next line asks the candidate if he agrees to abstain from the use of alcohol in all forms.)

The point we are trying to make here is twofold: (1) Christians tend to compile rules and regulations that go beyond what is written; and (2) when such grey zones are considered evil, those who do not abide by such rules are often viewed as 'the weaker brother.' In reality, the weaker brother in scripture is the one who has too many scruples, not too few (cf. Romans 14)! It is a tragic irony that as one matures in the faith, all too often his life collects more and more oppressive chains of legalism. As much as there may well be good reasons for one to *personally* hold to certain convictions,² we must be very careful about extending such beyond ourselves.³

²For example, we all know of some folks whose family history involves alcoholism. Many of these folks rightfully abstain for fear of their own tendencies to abuse alcohol. I have a friend who used to be an alcoholic and now cannot even gargle (since mouthwash usually has a large amount of alcohol) or else he could go into a drinking binge. He recognizes that his own convictions about alcohol are not universally applicable; his friends are sensitive enough not to drink in his presence.

³My views comport with my understanding of what it means to be a New Covenant Christian. Since we have been given the Spirit, we are no longer under the Old Testament law, but now must live by the law of Christ. The Spirit himself guides each one of us. There are, to be sure, several laws that must be obeyed (the New Testament has over two hundred); but as a New Covenant Christian I recognize both that the overriding principle of these commandments is love and that the undergirding power is provided by the Spirit of God.

The Biblical Data: Wine and other Alcoholic Beverages in the Bible

The following are some roughly random notes on wine and other alcoholic beverages in the Bible. Even a casual look at the scriptures reveals a much different perspective than what most modern American Christians have about this topic.

In general, we can say that the Bible neither condemns drinking *per se* nor promotes it. Drinking alcoholic beverages is one of those grey areas that is a matter of one's personal conscience. But there is more in scripture than just this individualistic approach.

Isn't it Really Grape Juice?

Some take the words for wine to mean 'grape juice.' If this were so, then why would there be prohibitions against drunkenness? One cannot get drunk on grape juice. Further, Jesus' first miracle was changing the water into wine at the wedding of Cana in Galilee. He made between 120 and 180 gallons of wine! Even if this had been grape juice, it would soon turn to wine because the fermentation process would immediately begin. But it most certainly was not grape juice: the head waiter in **John 2:10** said, "Every man sets out the good wine first, then after the guests have drunk freely, the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." The verb translated 'drunk freely' is almost always used of getting drunk (and is so translated in the NRSV here). In the least, the people at this wedding feast, if not drunk, would certainly be drinking alcohol fairly freely (if not, this verb means something here that is nowhere else attested⁴). And this makes perfect sense in the context: The reason why a man brings out the poorer wine later is because the good wine has numbed the senses a bit. Grape juice would hardly mask anything. Note also **Acts 2:13**—"they are full of sweet wine"—an inaccurate comment made about the apostles when they began speaking in tongues, as though this explained their unusual behavior. The point is: If they were full of grape juice would this comment even have made any sense at all? That would be like saying, "Well, they're all acting strange and silly because they have had too much orange juice this morning!"

There are other references to alcoholic beverages in the Bible: Several times in the first books of the Bible, wine and strong drink are prohibited to those who take a Nazarite vow (cf. Num 6, Judges 13). Even grape juice and fresh and dried grapes (i.e., raisins, as the NIV renders the word) are prohibited to the Nazarite (Numbers 6:3)!⁵ But that restriction is only for those who make this vow. If someone today wants to claim that believers do not have the right to drink alcohol on the analogy of a Nazarite vow (as some today are fond of doing), they also should say that believers ought not to eat Raisin Bran!

Negative Statements about Wine Indicate that it is not Grape Juice

Further, the Bible at times speaks very harshly about becoming enslaved to drink or allowing it to control a person, especially to the point of drunkenness. Proverbs 20:1—"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, And whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise" (NASB). Cf. also Prov 21:17 (where heavy drinking and gluttony are equally

⁴In the least, the verb *mequvskw*, when used of drinking, always means *at least* 'freely drinking of alcoholic beverages' (once in the LXX it is used metaphorically of being filled with grain [Hosea 14:8], though even here the imagery might involve a metonymy of cause for effect [if so, grain would mean fermented grain]). LSJ give as the first definition of this verb the causative notion of *make drunk, intoxicate*; for the passive form of the verb the lexicon gives *drink freely, get drunk*. BAGD gives the following definition: "*cause to become intoxicated*; in our lit. only pass. ... *get drunk, become intoxicated... drink freely, become drunk*." The semantic domain lexicon by Louw and Nida (23.37) offers this definition (though they incorrectly parse the verb as coming from *mequvw*): "to drink freely, to drink a great deal, to get drunk." (LN's definition for the verb *mequvskw* [88.285] is "to become intoxicated, to get drunk"; 1 Thess 5:7 uses both verbs interchangeably: "those who get drunk get drunk at night.")

⁵The very fact that the Hebrew text makes a distinction between wine and grape juice implies that when 'wine' is spoken of the fermented drink is in view.

condemned); 1 Sam 1:14; Isa 5:11, 22; 28:1 (drunkenness is condemned); 28:7; 29:9; 56:12; Jer 23:9; 51:7; Joel 3:3. In the New Testament notice: Eph 5:18 (“do not get drunk with wine”); 1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7 ([elders and deacons ought not be] “addicted to wine or strong drink”); Titus 2:3 (older women, who would serve as role models to the younger ones, must not be addicted to wine). As well, numerous passages use wine or drunkenness in an analogy about God’s wrath, immorality, etc. (cf. Rev. 14:8, 10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3).

The significance of these negative statements is just this: If this were only grape juice, why would excess in drinking it be condemned? If this were only grape juice, why are certain mental effects attributed to it (cf., e.g., Psalm 60:3)? One can’t have it both ways. You can’t say that wine is always grape juice, for then the negative statements in scripture make no sense; those who say that it is only grape juice tend to focus just on the neutral and positive passages, conveniently allowing them to condemn the drinking of real wine at all times. But even this position is not logical: *If the Bible only speaks of grape juice, then it makes no comment about alcoholic wine. And if so, then it does not directly prohibit it.* And if we are going to prohibit something that the Bible does not address, why stop at wine? Why don’t we include the ballet, opera, football games, country-western music (actually, I might be in favor of banning this one!), salt water fishing, zippers on clothes, etc. Once legalism infests the soul it doesn’t know where to quit.

In sum, is wine the same as grape juice? No, for if it were, the Bible would hardly condemn the abuse of such. Those who argue that the two are identical simply cannot handle the passages that speak about excess.

Neutral and Positive References to Alcoholic Beverages in the Bible

At the same time, there are several neutral, almost casual references to alcoholic beverages. Genesis 14:18 refers to Melchizedek, a type of Christ, as offering wine to Abram; Nehemiah 2:1 refers to the king drinking wine (Nehemiah was required to taste it first to make sure it was not poisoned); Esther 5:6; 7:1-2 speaks of wine that Esther (the godly Jewess) drank with the king; Job 1:13 refers to righteous Job’s family drinking wine; Daniel 10:3 speaks of drinking wine as a *blessing* after a time of fasting. Some of Jesus’ parables are about wine, wineskins, vineyards (cf. Matt 9:17; 21:33; even John 15 speaks of God the Father as the vinedresser!). Paul tells Timothy to drink some wine for his stomach’s sake and not just water (1 Tim 5:23). The same Greek and Hebrew terms that were used to speak of the abuses of wine are used in these passages. One cannot argue, therefore, that alcoholic beverages are in themselves proscribed, while grape juice is permitted. The lexical data cannot be so twisted.

There are, as well, positive statements about alcoholic beverages: Deut 14:26 implies that it is a *good* thing to drink wine and strong drink to the Lord: “And you may spend the money for whatever your heart desires, for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household” (NASB). Psalm 4:7 compares joy in the Lord to the abundance of wine; Psalm 104:14-15 credits God as the creator of wine that “makes a man’s heart glad” (cf. also Hos 2:8); honoring the Lord with one’s wealth is rewarded with the blessings of abundant stores of wine (Prov 3:10); love is compared to wine repeatedly in the Song of Songs, as though good wine were similarly sweet (1:2, 4; 4:10; 7:9). The Lord prepares a banquet with “well-aged wines... and fine, well-aged wines” for his people (Isa 25:6) [obviously this cannot be grape juice, for aging does nothing but ferment it!].

The *lack* of wine is viewed as a *judgment* from God (Jer 48:33; Lam 2:12; Hos 2:9; Joel 1:10; Hag 2:16); and, conversely, its provision is viewed as a blessing from the Lord (cf. Gen 27:28; Deut 7:13; 11:14; Joel 2:19, 24; 3:18; Amos 9:13-14). Cf. also Isa 55:1; Jer 31:12; Zech 9:17.

Indeed, there was even the Passover tradition that went beyond the biblical teaching: by the time of the first century, every adult was obliged to have *four* glasses of wine during the Passover celebration. Jesus and his disciples did this in the Last Supper.⁶ The fact that the wine of the Passover was a symbol the Lord used for his blood and for

⁶ Technically, Jesus and the disciples had only three ritual cups of wine. The fourth cup, which represented the kingdom, was not drunk. Thus, when Jesus prayed in the garden, “If it is your will, take this cup from me” he was referring to the symbolism of the third cup—the cup of redemption by judgment. However, even though they had only three *ritual* cups, they may well have had more non-ritual wine, for this was allowed.

the new covenant implicitly shows that our Lord's view of wine was quite different from that of many modern Christians.

What is truly remarkable here are the *many* positive statements made about wine and alcoholic beverages in the Bible.⁷ Wine is so often connected with the blessings of God that we are hard-pressed to figure out why so many modern Christians view drink as the worst of all evils. Why, if one didn't know better, he might think that God actually wanted us to enjoy life! Unfortunately, the only Bible most of our pagan friends will read is the one written on our lives and spoken from our lips. The Bible they know is a book of 'Thou shalt nots,' and the God they know is a cosmic killjoy.

I think the best balance on this issue can be seen in Luke 7:33-34: John the Baptist abstained from drinking wine; Jesus did not abstain [indeed, people called him a drunkard! Although certainly not true, it would be difficult for this charge to have been made had Jesus only drunk grape juice]. Both respected one another and both recognized that their individual lifestyles were not universal principles. One man may choose not to drink; another may choose to drink. We ought not condemn another servant of the Lord for his choice.

As well, Romans 14 is a key passage for gleaned principles about how we ought to conduct ourselves in relation to one another on this issue: weaker brothers ought not to judge those whose freedom in Christ allows them to enjoy alcoholic beverages; stronger brothers ought not to disdain weaker brothers for their stance. Whether we drink or not, let us do all things to the glory of God.

Conclusion

There is much more that could be said about this issue; no doubt many readers will respond critically for what was left out. In later essays I hope to address some questions that arise because of this piece.

This brief essay really has no conclusion; rather, this is the first volley in an ongoing discussion. The general contours of biblical teaching are that wine is a blessing from the Lord, something to be enjoyed. But like any good gift from God, it can be abused: in this case, abuse involves addiction and drunkenness. But whenever we condemn others who are able to enjoy God's good gifts in moderation as though they were abusers, we misrepresent biblical Christianity. At bottom, it seems that *biblical* Christianity has a much different face than what much of modern Christianity wears. In many respects, we resemble more the ancient Pharisees than the Lord's disciples.

⁷'Wine' occurs 236 times in the NASB, 214 times in the NIV, 230 times in the NRSV, and 210 times in the REB. Now, to be sure, not all of these are in positive statements, but neither are the majority in negatives statements. The most common Hebrew word is *nyy* (134 times in the MT), while the Greek word *οἶνο* occurs in the New Testament 26 times.