A Christian Perspective on Wine-Drinking

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The Bible makes it clear that God wants people to enjoy food and drink. For example, Ecclesiastes 9:7 says, “Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved of your works.” God is not a cosmic killjoy nor a heavenly Scrooge, for He “richly supplies us with all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). But does this mean that Christians can drink alcoholic beverages for enjoyment? Precisely at does the Bible say about the use of wine and the drinking of wine today?

What the Bible Teaches about Wine-Drinking

The Bible says several things about the use of wine.

DRUNKENNESS IS A SIN

Wine in the Bible was not to be used excessively, and one was not to become drunk with the fruit of the vine. In the Old Testament a drunkard was put to death (Deut. 21:20–21). Drunkenness was considered to be such an incorrigible sin that capital punishment was used for it as well as for murder, rape, blasphemy of parents, etc.

The Old Testament, it should be remembered, was a system of law. Christians are under grace, not law. But in both the Old and New Testaments God indicates that He hates drunkenness. According to 1 Corinthians 5:11, Christians are to separate themselves from a person who claims to be a Christian but who is a drunkard. Drunkards “shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9–10), nor will homosexuals or other kinds of sinners. Practicing homosexuals and drunkards do not inherit the kingdom of God. Obviously God hates drunkenness. Paul also wrote in Ephesians 5:18, “Do not get drunk with wine.” And drunkenness is listed in Galatians 5:19–21 among “the deeds of the flesh.”

STRONG DRINK IS DECEPTIVE AND SINFUL

The Bible says much about strong drink. For example, the priests were to avoid strong drink (Lev. 10:8–9). And Solomon wrote, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler” (Prov. 20:1). God is opposed to someone using strong drink because it brings deception and turbulence into his life. Rulers should not take strong drink, for it distorts their ability to think clearly and to judge clearly. Strong drink is not for kings lest they pervert justice (Prov. 31:4–5). Isaiah wrote, “Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink” (Isa. 5:11). This writer had an uncle who was drunk every day before noon his entire adult life. At about age forty he died of liver disease. He experienced the truth of Isaiah 24:9, “Strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.” It may seem sweet to begin with, but it will be bitter in the end. It was the false prophet who said, “I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer” (Mic. 2:11, NIV). God is opposed to

using strong drink as a beverage.[1] The Hebrew word for "strong drink" is שֵׁכָר. It is used 23 times and refers to an intoxicating drink made from barley, pomegranates, dates, apples, or honey. The more common Old Testament word for "wine" is יַיִן, used 141 times. The word תִּירוֹשׁ, on the other hand, occasionally translated "new wine," means the freshly pressed juice of the grape, that is, grape juice that has not yet fully fermented.[2] It is used 38 times (e.g., Gen. 27:28; Joel 2:24; Mic. 6:5).

DRINKING IN EXCESS IS WRONG

"Woe to you who are complacent in Zion.… You drink wine by the bowlful" (Amos 6:1, 6, NIV). Apparently cups were not large enough for those northern Israelites against whom Amos wrote. They drank so much that they had to drink from bowls. Overdrinking leads to sexual perversion (Hab. 2:15). Those who drink too much will sooner or later be involved in things such as the prophet described here. King Xerxes and his servants overdrank (Esther 1:10), and this led to the sexual perversion and shameful acts in which Queen Vashti refused to participate.

In addition drinking in excess results in a slowing of the thinking processes (Prov. 31:4–5; Isa. 28:7; Hos. 4:11); a stupor (Jer. 25:27; 51:39); sickness (Isa. 19:14; 28:7–8; Jer. 48:26); staggering (loss of balance and mental control) (Job 12:25; Isa. 28:7–8; 29:9); arrogance (Hab. 2:5); forgetfulness (Prov. 31:6–7); confusion and delirious dreams (Prov. 23:31, 33); sleepiness (Gen. 9:20–24; 19:33); lack of feeling (Prov. 23:31, 35); bloodshot eyes (Prov. 23:29–30); and poverty (Prov. 23:20–21).

CHURCH LEADERS ARE TO BE MODERATE

An elder is not to be addicted to wine, and a deacon is not to be given to much wine (1 Tim. 3:3, 8). Obviously, if God had meant that they should drink no wine at all, He could have easily said that. These verses do not say that elders were not to have any wine. Clearly, church leaders in Paul's day were to be moderate in the use of wine.

[1] The passage in Deuteronomy 14:26 which appears to commend buying "strong drink" (שֵׁכָר) cannot be used as a divine approval for drinking it for three reasons. First, the Old Testament clearly condemns drinking "strong drink," as the above passage indicates. Therefore this isolated and unclear passage must be understood in harmony with the clear Old Testament teaching against "strong drink." Second, the passage does not say they should *drink* it but only that they should *buy* it. Third, "strong drink" was used for medicinal purposes, so the commendation here is probably to buy medicine (see Prov. 31:6).

[2] Schultz correctly notes, "It is a specific reference to comparatively fresh grape juice which was not fully aged. References to *tirōsh* indicate that when incontinently used it was intoxicating. Hosea 4:11 says both *'yăyĭn* and *tirōsh* take away the understanding' (cf. Judges 9:13; Acts 2:13)" (*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, s.v. "Wine and Strong Drink," by A. C. Schultz, 5:935).

WINE WAS USED AS A MEDICINE

In the Bible, alcoholic beverages were recommended for medicinal purposes. Paul told Timothy, "Use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses" (1 Tim. 5:23, NIV). Timothy was told to take wine for his "stomach"[3] because wine aids the digestive tract. In the ancient world wine was a kind of laxative. And today it is known that wine taken with a meal will help in the digestion of the food. Timothy apparently had some problems along this line, so Paul recommended that he use wine to aid his digestion.

"Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter" (Prov. 31:6). This indicates that strong drink was used as a sedative or pain-killer for the dying, and that wine was also used to calm the nerves of those who were deeply bereaved or in deep distress. Also wine would "refresh those who become exhausted in the desert" (2 Sam. 16:2, NIV).

The Good Samaritan poured oil and wine on the wounds of the man who had been beaten by thieves (Luke 10:34). Wine was used to cure, to help heal wounds. So wine had at least four medicinal purposes in the Bible. It is prescribed as a laxative, as a pain-killer, as a stimulant or refreshant, and as a curative for wounds.

What the Bible Does Not Teach about Alcohol

After examining what the Bible does teach about alcohol, one needs to consider next what the Bible does not teach about alcohol. A number of myths in the evangelical church should be put to rest.

THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH THAT NEW TESTAMENT COMMUNION WINE WAS UNFERMENTED[4]

Many well-meaning people would like to say that the New Testament communal wine was grape juice. But people did not know of Welch's grape juice in the New Testament. All wine was fermented wine; even "new wine" was fermented wine as will be shown in the next paragraph. Some Corinthians were drunk at

[3] "Stomach" (στόμαχος) is not limited to the bodily organ presently given that name; it refers instead to the digestive system. It had a broad usage in New Testament times. Also the word στόμαχος was used to describe emotions such as "vexation" and "anger" (James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980], p. 592).

[4] The argument of some that the Passover (and hence communion) wine was unfermented seems unfounded (see William Patton, *Bible Wines or Laws of Fermentation and Wines of the Ancients* [1811; reprint ed., Oklahoma City: Sane Press, 1975]). Patton argued that since all leaven was forbidden in the Passover (Lev. 2:3–14) and since fermentation is a form of leavening, it follows that Passover wine was not fermented (p. 83). This argument seems weak for several reasons: (a) Fermented wine or drink is not mentioned among those things covered by "leaven." Leaven referred only to foods. (b) Even the word for "new wine" in the Old Testament refers to what is fermented (see n. 2 above). (c) Jewish tradition as described in 2 Maccabees 15:39 indicates that fermented juice mixed with water was used in the Passover. (d) Some believers in Corinth were drunk at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:21). They were definitely not using Welch's grape juice!

the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:21). And for the cause of drunkenness God was bringing sickness to some Christians and some of them were dying. Drunkenness at the Lord's Supper was such an abuse that God took the lives of some of the saints in Corinth (11:30). But if they were drunk at communion, then the wine must have been fermented. This seems to be the most reasonable conclusion to draw from this passage.

THE BIBLE DOES NOT TEACH THAT NEW WINE WAS UNFERMENTED

Some have held that old wine is fermented but that "new wine" (טִירוֹשׁ) was always unfermented. But two passages clearly oppose this theory. Hosea 4:11 says both "old wine" (יַיִן) and "new wine" (טִירוֹשׁ) "take away the understanding." So even "new wine" can cause drunkenness.[5] And in Acts 2:13 on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came on people and they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the crowd said, "These men are full of new wine" (Acts 2:13, AV).[6] So new wine in the Bible was just as fermented as old wine.

IT IS FALSE TO SAY THAT JESUS MADE UNFERMENTED WINE

As a matter of fact, He made wine that tasted so good the people at the wedding feast in Cana said it was better than the wine they had just drunk. Surely they would not have said this if it had tasted flat to them. In fact in John 2:9–10 it is called "wine" (οἶνος) and "good wine" (καλὸν οἶνον). These are the same words used for fermented wine elsewhere in the New Testament. (cf. Mark 2:22; Eph. 5:18).

IT IS INCORRECT TO SAY THAT THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHES THAT first-century CHRISTIANS WERE NOT TO USE WINE AT ANY TIME

That is not what the New Testament says, and in all honesty to the Scriptures, one should say precisely what the Scriptures teach on this topic. No verse states that Christians at that time should abstain from *all* wine at all times. As has been shown, the exhortations were against *strong* drink and *much* wine.

[5] See note 1 above on the fermented nature of "new wine." It seems obvious, however, from Jesus' reference to the bursting of wineskins by new wine (Mark 2:22) that it was in the active process of fermentation. As Schultz has noted, "Usually the new wine was left in the vat to undergo the first fermentation which took from four to seven days. It was then drawn off (Hag. 2:16, lit. baled out). If the vat had a spout the wine was run off into jars or wineskins to complete the process of fermentation (Matt. 9:17). The whole period of fermentation would last from two to four months when the wine would be ready for use" (Schultz, "Wine and Strong Drink," p. 938).

[6] The New Testament word for *new* wine is γλεῦκος, meaning "sweet wine." And it is obvious from the usage in Acts 2:13 that even it could make one drunk. The other word for wine in the New Testament is οἶνος. It is used in the phrase "new wine" in Mark 2:22 as well as in the "winepress" reference in Revelation 19:15. It is also the Greek term used to translate "new wine" (יַיִן) in Hosea 4:11. This usage would seem to support the fact that even "new wine" (whether or יַיִן or γλεῦκος or οἶνος νέος) can and does mean fermented wine.

New Testament churches did not have a "purity pledge" that included a prohibition against drinking or other practices. Nowhere does the New Testament say that not drinking any wine was a condition for church membership.

Is Wine Today like New Testament Wine?

Many wine-drinking Christians today mistakenly assume that what the New Testament meant by wine is identical to wine used today. This, however, is false. In fact today's wine is by biblical definitions "strong drink," and hence is forbidden in the Bible! What the Bible frequently meant by wine was basically purified water.

Stein researched wine-drinking in the ancient world, in Jewish sources, and in the Bible.[7] He pointed out that wine in Homer's day was twenty parts water and one part wine (*Odyssey* 9.208–9). Pliny referred to wine as eight parts water and one part wine (*Natural History* 14.6.54). According to Aristophanes, it was stronger: three parts water and two parts wine. Other classical Greek writers spoke of other mixtures: Euenos—three parts water, one part wine; Hesiod—three to one, water to wine; Alexis—four to one; Diocles and Anacreon—two to one; and Ion—three to one. The average was about three or four parts of water to one part of wine.

Sometimes in the ancient world one part water would be mixed with one part wine; this was considered strong wine. And anyone who drank wine unmixed was looked on as a Scythian, a barbarian. That means the Greeks would say today, "You Americans are barbarians—drinking straight wine."

For example, Athenaeus quoted Mnesitheus of Athens as saying, "In daily intercourse, to those who drink it moderately it gives good cheer; but if you overstep the bounds it brings violence. Mix it half and half and you get madness; unmixed—bodily collapse."[8] Here is a pagan saying, "Half and half is madness, and unmixed wine brings death."

Stein also observes that "in several instances in the Old Testament a distinction is made between 'wine' and 'strong drink' " (e.g., Lev. 10:8–9). Strong drink is one thing, wine is another thing. The same distinction is made in Deuteronomy 14:26; 29:6; Judges 13:4; and elsewhere. According to the Talmud the "wine" used in the Passover meal was three parts water and one part wine (cf. 2 Macc. 15:39).[9]

It may also be that the wine Jesus miraculously provided at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1–11) was a similar drink, that is, wine mixed with water. The word οἶνος ("wine") refers sometimes to fermented grape juice (e.g., Eph. 5:18) and sometimes to fresh, not fully fermented grape juice (e.g., Rev. 19:15).

Furthermore, in ancient times not many beverages were safe to drink. Stein indicates that in the ancient

[7] See the excellent article by Robert H. Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today*, June 20, 1975, pp. 9–11.

[8] Ibid., p. 9.

[9] The reference in Isaiah 1:22 to diluted wine as bad should be taken not as a proof that Jews did not mix wine (see 2 Macc. 15:39), but as a metaphor of spiritual adulteration (cf. Isa. 1:21).

world water could be made safe in one of several ways. It could be boiled, but this was tedious and costly. Or it could be filtered, but this was not a safe method. Or some wine could be put in the water to kill the germs—one part wine with three or four parts water.

Wine today has a much higher level of alcohol than wine in the New Testament. In fact in New Testament times one would need to drink twenty-two glasses of wine in order to consume the large amount of alcohol in two martinis today. Stein humorously notes, "In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts water, but one's drinking would probably affect the bladder long before the mind."[10]

Though fermented wine was drunk in Bible times and though the Bible approved of wine-drinking, one needs to remember that the alcoholic content was much less than that of wine today. What is used today is *not* the wine of the New Testament! Therefore Christians ought not drink wine, beer, or other alcoholic beverages for they are actually "strong drink" and are forbidden in Scripture. Even ancient pagans did not drink what some Christians drink today!

Deciding about Wine-Drinking Today

How should one decide today whether or not to drink alcoholic beverages? Christians should carefully consider the following four questions.

WHAT ARE THE FACTS ABOUT ALCOHOL?

Before a person decides to drink or to continue drinking, he should be fully aware of the following facts about alcoholic beverages and their effects today.[11]

1. An estimated ten million problem drinkers or alcoholics are in the United States adult population.
2. Of adults who drink, 36 percent can be classed as problem drinkers.
3. In addition, an estimated 3.3 million young people ages 14–17 are problem drinkers.
4. Alcohol-related deaths may run as high as 200,000 per year. In two years' time there are as many alcoholic-related deaths as there were in the entire Vietnam War!
5. Alcohol abuse and alcoholism cost the United States about $50 billion in 1975. That figure has risen considerably since then.
6. Between 1966 and 1975 the percent of high school students who said they had been drunk increased from 19 percent to 45 percent.
7. Alcohol is one cause of cancer.
8. Fetal alcohol syndrome is the third greatest cause of birth defects.
9. Evidence exists that social drinking impairs one's social and intellectual capacities. Rather than

[10] Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," p. 11.

[11] Unless otherwise noted, statistics are taken from an editorial, "A Plea for Total Abstinence," in *The Evangelical Beacon*, November 13, 1979, p, 12.

getting sharper, people who drink get duller.

10. Half of all traffic fatalities and one-third of all traffic injuries are alcohol-related. Whereas a person has the legal right to drink, he does not have the right to endanger the lives of others on the highway by his drinking.

11. A high percentage of child-abusing parents have drinking problems.

12. A relatively high correlation exists between alcohol consumption and robbery, rape, assault, homicide; and more than one-third of suicides involve alcohol.

13. Taxpayers pay $11 to offset each $1 paid in liquor revenue.[12]

WILL WINE-DRINKING LEAD TO SIN?

The Bible is not ambiguous about drunkenness. It is not unclear about overdrinking. It is not equivocal about strong drink. But what does the Bible say about drinking *moderate* amounts of alcohol? First Corinthians 6:12 lays down a principle for borderline, questionable areas such as this. “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable.” So one must ask, Even if it is permissible, is it profitable?

The same verse adds, “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.” In view of this, one must ask, Am I the master of it, or is it the master of me? A person may think he is mastering his drinking, but if wine is something he *must* have, then it is mastering him.

WILL WINE-DRINKING LEAD ANYONE ELSE TO SIN?

Christians are to be concerned not only about their own lives but also about others. Paul wrote in Philippians 2:4, “Do not merely look out for your own personal interests but also for the interests of others.” And Christians should seriously consider Romans 14:21: “It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles.” A believer should ask himself, “Will my drinking cause anyone else to sin? Even if it would not be a problem to me, is it possible that it would cause someone else to stumble?” This writer knows of former alcoholics who have attended church communion services in which fermented wine has been served, and just the taste of a little bit of it drove them back into alcoholism.

CAN WINE-DRINKING BE DONE TO THE GLORY OF GOD?

Paul wrote, “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). If a Christian cannot be praising God and glorifying Him while he is drinking, then it is not good for him, and it is not glorifying to God.

Why Christians Need Not Drink Wine

Several reasons may be offered as to why Christians ought to refrain from wine-drinking. First, people in

[12] Reported by Horace E. Chandler, “Let’s Unmask John Barleycorn,” *Christianity Today*, April 15, 1966, p. 15.

the United States have plenty of wholesome, nonaddictive beverages. The situation today is unlike biblical times when there were not many wholesome beverages. People often did not have good water available; it was often polluted. Travelers today know that in many foreign countries pure drinking water is difficult to obtain. In many foreign places, travelers become sick from drinking the water. This is similar to biblical times.

Thus it is wrong to argue that since people in Bible times drank wine, Christians today can do the same. Properly speaking, people then drank purified water. New Testament wine was basically a water-purification method. It was not an unsafe liquor; it was a safe liquid. But in America purifying water with wine is unnecessary, and plenty of nonaddictive beverages are available.

Second, America is an alcoholic culture, but the New Testament culture was not. Ten million Americans are alcoholics, with more than three million of them teenagers. In New Testament times, there were comparatively few drunks, and alcohol was not a problem in their culture to the extent it is in this nation.

Third, total abstinence is the safer policy. A person cannot abuse drinking if he does not drink. In *Christianity Today* a few years ago, a writer asked, "How many people would fly if they knew there was a chance of one in ten that the plane would crash?"[13] The chances of airplanes crashing are certainly not that high—far from it; but if they were, undoubtedly many people would refuse ever to board another plane. And yet the chances of an occasional or moderate drinker becoming an alcoholic are in fact one in ten!

Fourth, total abstinence is the more consistent policy. A few years ago when the drug culture became so dominant and people became so concerned about young people's use of marijuana, heroin, and harder drugs, the government studied the problem of drug abuse. The results chagrined many adults: The number-one problem in the United States is alcohol! It is not marijuana, nor heroin, nor LSD, but alcohol—the "establishment" drug, the adults' drug, the legal drug. This in no way suggests that marijuana or other illegal drugs should be approved. But young people look at adults and say, "Hypocrites! You approve of your drug, and it's the biggest one in the country, and you disapprove of our drugs." And therefore it is difficult to win young people from drugs; they see the sheer hypocrisy of many adults.

Since today's society is alcohol-polluted, this writer suggests that Christians take a strong stand against all alcoholic beverages. This writer would like to suggest that Christians, in a Nazaritelike vow, should protest the destructive effects of alcoholism and should voluntarily abstain from all alcohol consumption. Of course such abstinence in itself does not make a Christian more spiritual, nor is it because the Bible says that wine should never be taken by anyone for any purpose. He is voluntarily protesting against the abuse of alcohol in American society, and is calling on all Christians to join in that protest.

The main reason people drink wine is that it provides relaxation and enjoyment. Does abstinence, then, suggest that God is a cosmic killjoy? Is He against peace and enjoyment? By no means. However, He wants people to have genuine peace and real joy—the peace of God and the joy of Christ. In this regard, the Bible says, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18, NIV). God wants Christians to have peace without going to pieces. David said, "Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; in Thy presence is fulness of joy; in Thy right hand there are pleasures forever" (Ps. 16:11). It

[13] *Christianity Today*, November 18, 1977, p. 24.

is a shameful testimony for a believer in Christ to resort to alcohol in order to relax, when the “peace of God that surpasses all understanding” (Phil. 4:7, NKJB) is available to him. And it is an insult to the Holy Spirit for Christians to seek the superficial pleasure of stimulants when they can have the permanent joy of the Holy Spirit. God wants people to eat and drink with joy, but without jeopardy. He desires that man’s pleasures be Spirit-directed, not self-centered; that they be helpful, but not harmful.