

# ALCOHOL

One of the major social issues of our day is the use of alcoholic beverages. The hypocrisy of our secular society on this subject is distressing enough. Even more disappointing, though, is the lack of knowledge among Christians about the evils of this wicked substance. In spite of what many wish, the Bible is immensely clear in its attitude toward alcoholic beverages and their uses by those who belong to Christ.

Our society insists upon labeling alcoholism as a disease. Because of this we have been well informed about its effects and consequences. Intoxication is one of the major causes of accidents, injury and death on the nation's highways. So serious is this problem, that extensive advertising campaigns have been conducted to convince people that they should not drive if they have been drinking. Even if a drunken person is not driving an automobile, he still jeopardizes the lives of other people, especially his family members who are constantly exposed to his irresponsible behavior. Then, of course, there is the danger to one's own health which results from consuming alcoholic beverages. The long range effect has the potential of leading to irritation and inflammation of the digestive system and may seriously affect the heart, liver, stomach, and other organs. In very small doses, alcohol destroys brain cells, which means the cumulative affect of long term use may cause the alteration of the personality due to extensive brain damage.

The Bible, on the other hand defines drunkenness as sin. It is one of the works of the flesh listed in Galatians 5:19-21 along with such things as adultery, fornication, idolatry, heresies, and murders, among others. There are a multitude of Bible verses that address the evil of the substance and the spiritual consequences of its use. For example, Proverbs 20:1 says, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise." Proverbs 4:17 associates wine with violence and Proverbs 23:31-33 declares that the use of alcohol leads to promiscuity.

With all of the information available from both a secular and spiritual perspective, there are still Christians who insist that a little drink now and then is acceptable. Is it okay? Or, can the case be made for total abstinence?

## Seeking A License To Drink

For those who want to indulge, the contention is that the Bible never says it is wrong to drink alcohol; it only says it is wrong to drink a lot of alcohol. Indeed, there are Bible verses that appear to support this. In Ephesians 5:18, only excess seems to be criticized. I Timothy 5:23 suggests a "little wine" is good for the stomach. I Timothy 3:8 and Titus 2:3 instruct deacons and aged women not to be given to much wine. And, Proverbs 31:6 proposes that wine has medicinal value, both physically and psychologically.

Besides, the argument continues, Jesus himself drank wine. In Matthew 26:27-29, He even blessed a cup full of the fruit of the vine, gave it to His disciples and told them He would drink it with them again in the Kingdom to come.

A serious question must be asked, though. Why would Jesus encourage the use of such a deadly substance? The assumption is that if Jesus drank wine, He drank alcohol. But did He? Or, were there wines in the Bible which contained no alcoholic content? If so, how does this affect some of the contexts which suggest the use of wine?

## Understanding Wine In The Bible

While the current usage of the word wine refers exclusively to beverages of alcoholic content, this has not always been the only definition of the word. In older dictionaries, wine is defined more generally as a beverage derived from the fruit of vines which may be either alcoholic or non-alcoholic.

New Century Dictionary, published by Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. in 1927:  
Wine is “unfermented grape juice; also, the juice, fermented or unfermented of various other fruits or plants, used as a beverage, etc.” (Page 2214)

It is equally true that the Bible uses the word wine to refer to both fermented and unfermented beverages. William Patton, in his book Bible Wines or Laws of Fermentation and Wines of the Ancients, states,

In the Hebrew Scriptures the word “yayin” in its broadest meaning, designates grape-juice, or the liquid which the fruit of the vine yields. This may be new or old, sweet or sour, fermented or unfermented, intoxicating or unintoxicating (page 56). In the New Testament we have oinos, which correspond exactly to the Hebrew yayin. As both yayin and oinos are generic words, they designate the juice of the grape in all its stages (page 62).

Just because Jesus drank wine does not mean He drank alcoholic beverages or that He meant for anyone else to do so. In fact, at the last supper Jesus designated the bread of the Passover as representative of His body and the wine as representative of His blood. The bread was unleavened which means it contained no yeast. Yeast in the Scripture was consistently used as a symbol of sin and since Jesus was Himself without sin, He was careful to use a yeastless bread as a symbol for the perfect body that would serve as the sacrificial lamb without blemish. It is unreasonable then to believe that Jesus would use a deteriorated, intoxicating wine to symbolize His pure blood that would pay for all man’s sin? Some would argue that because He took upon Himself the sin of the whole world, alcoholic wine serves as a better symbol for the contamination Christ experienced on the cross. If Christ wanted to include the contamination of sin in the symbols of His sacrifice, He would have imposed it upon the bread, not the juice, for the payment of sin required a pure blood that could wash away the sin of mankind, which is evidenced by the contamination of the flesh.

Clearly, the wine Jesus used in the “Last Supper” was unfermented. It would have been totally uncharacteristic of Christ, who never committed any sin and at the time of the Last Supper had not yet taken upon Himself the sin of the whole world, to have consumed an intoxicating substance even in the smallest of quantities, jeopardizes the perfect condition of his flawless humanity.

The use of unfermented wine was in common usage during Bible days. William Patton documents its usage as well as the processes used to preserve the grape juice in its sweet form. Augustine Calmet, the learned author of the Dictionary of the Bible, published around 1700 said, “The ancients possessed the secret of preserving wines sweet throughout the whole year.” Furthermore, many men of ancient times testify to this including Aristotle, Columella, Pliny, Horace, Virgil and others.

The Scriptures treat wine in two respects which correspond to its fermented and unfermented conditions. Some Scriptures condemn wine as an evil substance and use it to illustrate judgment and wrath. Other references praise wine as a sweet substance to be enjoyed and use it to illustrate blessing and worship. The distinction is obviously not based upon quantity of consumption, but upon kind. Fermented wine is always the evil substance and unfermented grape juice is the sweet.

## **The Logic of Total Abstinence**

## 1. A Christian is crucified to the flesh.

Drunkenness is a work of the flesh (Galatians 5:21). Those who belong to Jesus Christ have “crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts” thereof (Galatians 5:24). Therefore, to open the door to the works of the flesh by consuming any form or quantity of a substance, that is clearly related to the works of the flesh, contradicts the work of Christ in rescuing us from those things. As sanctified and justified people, we have been washed clean of such things (I Corinthians 6:9-11). Our past involvement in them is sufficient indulgence for the flesh (I Peter 4:1-4). We ought to leave it alone.

## 2. A Priest Is To Show The Difference Between What is Holy and What is Unholy.

Every Christian has been designated a priest as a member of the Body of Christ. I Peter 2:5 says, “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”

Old Testament regulations for priests mandate some important principles for the way every believer should conduct his life. In Leviticus 10:9-10, priests were forbidden to consume any alcoholic beverages at a time which would leave any trace of the substance in his system when he entered the tabernacle. Large groups of people watched the priests go into the tent where the very glory of the presence of God dwelt. It was absolutely essential that the priests demonstrate the holy nature of God by entering His presence in the most sanctified state possible. Other wise, God’s integrity could have been jeopardized. The present day parallel should be obvious. Not only are Christians priests, their bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19). If God did not want any alcohol in the system of an Old Testament priest when he entered the Tabernacle, He surely does not appreciate any alcohol being poured into the very tabernacle (human body) where He is presently dwelling on earth.

### **Conclusion**

As far as the contexts are concerned where Bible verses seem to give approval for consuming alcoholic beverages, there is a logical explanation for each. For example, when elders are instructed to be “not given to wine”, total abstinence is clear. But what is meant when the deacons are told not to be given to much wine? It was common practice in Roman influenced culture to eat and drink at regular meals in such quantity as to cause regurgitation. Consuming a large quantity of beverages was part of the process and being given to much wine became an idiom referring to gluttony.

Excessive drinking, even of uninebriated drinks, was a vice prevalent in the days of St. Paul, and corresponded to gluttony, also common -- the excessive use of food, but not of an intoxicating kind. (The Temperance Bible Commentary by F. R. Lees and D. Burns, published in London, 1868, page 368.)

There is not one Bible reference that can be used to justify even the smallest consumption of alcoholic beverage. When Timothy is told to drink a little wine for his stomach sake, it is a reference to unfermented wine. The medicinal use of alcohol was largely external (Luke 10:34). The condemnation of drunkenness in no way is intended to be a license for lesser forms of consumption.

Alcoholics certainly need help because of the addictive nature of intoxicants. There are physical, mental and social consequences of their long term use. Professional help is required and freedom does not come easy. Any assistance must include both medical and spiritual therapy if full recovery is to be secured.

The best cure for alcoholism, however, is to totally abstain from ever using the substance in the first place. At one time, we enjoyed a Constitutional amendment prohibiting the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Unfortunately, our government felt it better to license the use of a deadly substance than enforce the law.

Compromise is never a wise solution for a Christian. If we really want to show the world what God is like, we must avoid indulging in vices that contradict such a testimony. Isaiah 5:22-23 says, "Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him!" It is a spiritual oxymoron to say that a person is strong enough to drink a substance that makes him weak. Be a truly strong believer-priest. Be clean from all the wicked substances of the world and demonstrate the difference between the holy and the unholy.