

Christians are greatly divided on the subject of drinking alcohol. Basically there are two schools of thought on this matter. One school advances the belief that believers should be teetotalers and the other school says that it is alright to have a social drink. Unlike other similar subjects addressed in this series, the Bible has a lot to say about alcohol. We will look at what the Bible has to say about this issue and how it applies to God's people.

THE CLEAR TEACHINGS ON ALCOHOL IN THE BIBLE

Drunkenness is a Sin

The Bible is very clear that anyone who consumes alcohol to the point of drunkenness is committing a sin. In the Old Testament a rebellious drunkard son was put to death (Deut. 21:20-21). The Apostle Paul said that no drunkard would inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10). Drunkards are not controlled by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) but on the contrary they are being dominated by the flesh (Gal. 5:19-20).

Drunkenness Results in Devastating Consequences

“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; 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. 1:6-7); 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).”¹

Warnings Against Strong Drink

In the Old Testament the Lord gave several stern warnings about strong drink. The priests were to avoid strong drink (Lev. 10:8-9). Solomon said that strong drink stirs up controversies (Prov. 20:1) and government leaders should avoid strong drink (Prov 3:4-5). God pronounces a woe of judgment through the prophet Isaiah against those who drinks strong drink (Prov. Isa. 5:11). Elders and deacons were exhorted to exercise great care when consuming wine (1 Tim. 3:3, 8).

Alcohol Was Used for Medicinal Purposes

Paul told Timothy to drink some wine to help with the problem he was having with his stomach (1 Tim. 5:23). The writer of Proverbs said to give strong drink, for anesthetic purposes, to those who are dying (Prov. 31:6). In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan poured wine in the wounds of the man who had been physically beaten on the Jericho Road (Lk. 10:34).

THE CONTROVERSIAL TEACHINGS OF ALCOHOL IN THE BIBLE

Types of Alcohol

In our culture there are three types of alcohol— **Beer** which is 3-6% alcohol and made from fermented grains malt and hops; **Wine** which is 9-20% alcohol and made from fermented fruits and vegetables; **Hard liquor** is

anywhere from 15-40% alcohol and is made from the distillation of several different products. In the Bible there are several types of drinks that fall into this discussion — unfermented grape juice, fermented wine and strong drink.

1. **Unfermented Grape Juice.** The Hebrew word *Yayin* (Song of Sol. 5:1) and the Hebrew word *Tirosh* (Prov. 3:10); The Greek word *Oinos* (Rev. 19:15).
2. **Fermented Wine.** The Hebrew word *Yayin* (Ps. 104:15); the Greek word *Gleuchos* (Acts 2:13) and the Greek word *Oinos* (Eph. 5:18).
3. **Strong Drink.** The Hebrew word *-Sekar* (Prov. 20:1); the Greek word *Sikera* (*Lk. 1:15*).

Fermented Wine

As we can see in the section above, two of the three types of wines can be clearly identified. Unfermented grape juice is clearly non-alcoholic and strong drink is clearly alcoholic. This leaves us to understand the nature of fermented wine. Norman Geisler gives us the following information concerning fermented wine in the Bible. “Biblical wine was fermented but diluted 3 to 1.” In the Jewish Talmud, “Passover wine was 3 parts water to 1 part wine.” During the Intertestamental Period the Book of Macabees recorded the following information, “*It is harmful to drink wine alone, or, again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious...*” (2 Mac. 15:39). Geisler continues, “In ancient times wine was usually stored in large pointed jugs called *amphorae*. When wine was to be used it was poured from the *amphorae* into large bowls called *kraters*, where it was mixed with water From these

¹ Norman Geisler, “A Christian Perspective on Wine-Drinking”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* [January-March 1982]:49

kraters, cups or *kylix* were then filled."

Keeping in line with his point Geisler turns to quotes by the Church Fathers. "Thus, therefore, in considering the cup of the Lord, water alone cannot be offered, even as wine alone cannot be offered" Cyprian (Epist. 62.2.11). "It is best for the wine to be mixed with as much water as possible" Clement of Alexandria (Instructor 2.2).² Based on Geisler's information we should conclude that fermented wine spoken of in the Bible did not contain the same level of alcohol that is in the alcoholic beverages of today.

Jesus Turned the Water into Wine at the Wedding in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-9)

Pro-Fermentation:

"...in John 2:9-10 it is called 'wine' (*oinos*) and 'good wine' (*kalon oinon*). These are the same words used for fermented wine elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. Mark 2:22; Eph. 5:18)."³

Con-Fermentation:

"*oinos* is a generic term, including all kinds of wine, unfermented and fermented... Thus the fact that the wine made by Christ at Cana is called *oinos*, offers no grounds for concluding that it was fermented wine."⁴

Jesus and the Disciples Drank Wine at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:17-19)

Pro-Fermentation:

It was a Jewish custom to use fermented wine when observing the Passover. "Wine was a

traditional part of the Jewish Passover. Without modern methods of refrigeration, grape juice could not be preserved for all times of the year. The Passover season was not conducive to grape juice since it was well between harvests."⁵

Con-Fermentation:

According to the rules of the feast, God stipulated, "Seven days shall there be no leaven found in your houses. ... Ye shall eat nothing leavened" (Exodus 12:19-20). Any leavening agent, such as yeast, that caused fermentation was not allowed in the Jewish household during Passover. They could not eat or drink anything leavened or fermented during this feast.⁶

CONCLUSION

The subject of drinking alcohol is very controversial in Christian circles. Believers who want to drink have found verses to support their position, likewise those who oppose drinking have located Biblical support for their point of view. The following points should be kept in mind when tackling this subject:

1. Strong drink is condemned in the Bible (Prov. 23:29-35).
2. Drunkenness is a sin (Gal. 5:19-20).
3. Drinking alcohol can become addictive (1Cor. 6:12).
4. Drinking alcohol can be detrimental to one's health (1 Cor. 6:19-20).
5. Drinking alcohol can be a stumbling block to others (Rom 14:21).

THE BIBLE AND ALCOHOL



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²Norman Geisler, Ten Reasons not to Drink Alcohol, normangeisler.net/drinkmot.pdf. [Accessed on November 2, 2010].

³ Ibid.

⁴ Samuele Bacchiocchi, Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages, http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/books/wine_in_the_bible/4.html [Accessed on September 12, 2007].

⁵ The Primitive Baptists, Why Do Primitive Baptists Use Real Wine and Unleavened Bread in Communion? <http://www.amazinggracelibrary.com/faqs/faq8.html> [Accessed on September 12, 2007]

⁶ Kenneth E. Loy, Jr. CN, Did Jesus Turn Water into Alcoholic Wine? <http://www.mybodyhistemple.com/mbht/atn/health19.html> [Accessed on September 12, 2007]