

ALCOHOL TO DRINK OR NOT TO DRINK

Some Notes

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SOME NOTES¹

(C. Gianotti, January 2002)

INTRODUCTION

God is not a God of depression or a “kill-joy”. He wants us to enjoy life to the fullest.

Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that God favors what you do. Eccl. 9:7

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This, too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment? Eccl. 2:24

... [God] richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. I Tim 6:17

However, our enjoyment of life takes place within the parameters God has set for us. How then do we determine these parameters? This discussion, unfortunately, may bring out strong feelings: ridicule of the fact that any serious discussion would be even be tendered, recollections of former debates over legalism vs. license, etc. We suggest, nonetheless, that it is time for a fresh look at this age old problem, especially in view of the widespread usage of alcohol and its on-going abuse in our western society.

First, we need to study what the Word of God explicitly states. Second, where we cannot discern a “*Thus saith the Lord...*”, we must apply godly wisdom using the principles of life and godliness derived from the Word.

Of primary importance is knowing and affirming our goal in life, for the individual aspects of our lives are governed by what our overall focus or target is. The biblical, spirit-filled Christian has the singular goal of glorifying and exalting Christ (Phil 1:20). This involves doing what pleases God (Col 1:10) and not ourselves (Phil 2:3-4). We need not only to choose between right and wrong, but to choose between better and best “*...that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ.*” Phil 1:10

Jesus Himself said that when we follow close by Him and His Word we will experience life at it’s best: “*...I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it abundantly.*” John 10:10

THE BIBLICAL TEXT

To begin, we must understand what the Word of God explicitly says. We cannot glorify Christ and at the same time minimize what His Word says. On the other hand, out of integrity, we must be honest and clearly acknowledge what the Word does not say. If, in our efforts to defend a legitimate cause, we err by asserting dogmatically what the Lord has not said, we hurt the very cause we seek to defend. In addition, we stand guilty of adding to His Word.

What the Bible Teaches About the Use of Alcohol

1. *Drunkenness Is Sin and Foolishness*

- a) Eph 5:18 “*Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.*”
- b) Galatians 5:19-20 “*The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: ‘...drunkenness...’* [Note: drunkenness is put in the same category as sexual immorality, idolatry, etc.]
- c) Deut 21:20 Notice the punishment in the Old Testament for a son who is given to drunkenness: “*They [i.e. the parents] shall say to the elders, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is profligate and a drunkard.’ Then, all the men of his town shall stone him to death.*” [Note: drunkenness in the Old Testament incurs the same punishment for murder, rape, blasphemy. Though as Christians we do not draw our ethic from OT theocratic laws, we do find in this verse that God’s attitude toward drunkenness is quite serious.]
- d) I Cor 5:11 “*...you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother [i.e. Christian] but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat.*”
- e) I Cor 6:9 “*Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral ... nor drunkards...*”

2. *Strong Drink Is Deceptive and Impairs Judgment*

- a) Proverbs 20:1 “*Wine is a mocker and strong drink a brawler; whoever is lead astray by them is not wise.*” Alcohol causes deception and turbulence to life.
- b) Leviticus 10:8-9 The Israelite priests were to avoid strong drink: “*The LORD then spoke to Aaron, saying, ‘Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you...’*”
- c) Proverbs 23:31-34 presents a graphic description of the deceptiveness of alcohol: “*Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights and your mind imagine confusing things. You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging.*”

- d) Proverbs 31:4 “*It is not for kings...to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what the law decrees and deprive all the oppressed of their rights.*”

3. *Overdrinking or Drinking in Excess Is Wrong*

- a) Amos 6:6 “*Woe to those that drink wine in bowls.*”
- b) Habakkuk 2:15 “*Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.*” [Note: Overdrinking leads to lowering inhibitions and often immoral sexual activity. See Esther 1:10 where many Old Testament commentators feel Queen Vashti was asked to participate in lewd exhibitionism before the King and his men who had been drinking. See also Gen 9:21 where Noah became drunk and was exposed to his son, Ham.

4. *Church Leaders Are to Be Moderate.*

- a) I Tim 3:3 “*...[an elder is to be] not given to much wine...*” That is, he should not be characterized by wine drinking.
- b) I Tim 3:8 “*Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect sincere, not indulging in much wine...*”

5. *Alcohol May Be Used For Medicinal Purposes*

- a) I Tim 5:23 “*...use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.*” [Note: Wine is known for its laxative qualities and helps digest food.]
- b) Prov 31:6 “*Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more.*” Alcohol can be used as a sedative/painkiller, particularly in a society where modern medicines are unavailable. The poverty mentioned here is probably that associated with their terminal illness.
- c) Luke 10:34ff: The Good Samaritan used wine to pour in the wounds of the beaten man.

6. *Jesus, the Disciples and Early Christians Drank Alcoholic Wine*

- a) At the wedding at Canaan (John 2:1-11) the wine made by Jesus was commended for being good wine, better than what had been presented before [This is the same word as used elsewhere in the Scriptures for wine.]
- b) Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:15) - Jesus used alcoholic wine as was customary for the Passover celebration of the Jews.
- c) I Cor 11:21 The fact that some of the Corinthians were drunk on communion wine demonstrates that it was alcoholic.

What the Bible Does Not Teach About Alcohol

1. The Bible does not teach that “new wine” was unfermented, as some would assert. Clearly, in Acts 2:13, the assumption was that “new wine” could cause drunkenness. “*These men are drunk with new wine.*” (see Joel 1:5).
2. It is false, therefore, to say that Jesus made unfermented wine (cf. John 2:9).
3. The Bible does not present abstinence as a condition for church fellowship.
4. The New Testament does not explicitly teach that no Christian should drink any alcohol at any time.

Summary

1. Drunkenness is sin and foolishness.
2. Strong drink is deceptive.
3. Overdrinking or drinking in excess is wrong.
4. Church leaders are to be moderate.
5. Alcohol use is permissible for medicinal use.
6. Jesus, the disciples and early Christians drank wine.

INSIGHTS AND APPLICATION

To apply what the Bible teaches to our current situation requires going beyond simple “proof-texting”. We err seriously by drawing conclusions mindlessly and avoiding the general principles of godly living found throughout the scriptures. We need to seek God’s wisdom for our day and this requires pure motives, serious thought, and the desire to please God.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth. II Tim 2:15

...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Phil 1:27

...applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence... II Peter 1:5

...that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects... Col 1:10

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. I Cor 6:12

All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor” I Cor 10:23-24

...that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ... Phil 1:10

We ask now: While the use of alcohol is permissible at times for Christians, is the use of alcohol today profitable, edifying or excellent?” One may attempt to

argue that this reasoning would eliminate a vast majority of neutral activities. But, two thoughts come to the fore in response. First, if more Christians would seriously ask this question in other areas of life, the result could be freedom from false guilt over unnecessary legalism. In other words, many Christians engage in morally neutral areas but wrongly feel guilty about it. Secondly, maybe some areas are not so “morally neutral” upon this closer inspection. Could it be possible that a person’s concern is whether an activity is “Biblically legal” or not—rather than whether it is “profitable”, “excellent” or “pleasing to the Lord”? Indeed, this question may eliminate many so-called “neutral” areas! But, then, what is our goal in life? To love ourselves or love God and others (the two greatest commandments—Matt 22:37-39)?

How then do we distinguish between that which is edifying/profitable and that which is not? That which is excellent and that which is inferior? We need first to understand the times in which the Scriptures were written, then understand our times, and finally weight carefully the pros and cons of the issue.

The Ancient Situation

1. *Wine among the ancient Greeks and Romans.*

The following ancient writers reveal interesting facts about wine usage in their times. The figures show the normal dilution of wine that was considered proper and normal (see Robert H. Stein, “Wine-Drinking in the New Testament Times”, *Christianity Today*, June 20, 1975).

- a) Homer: 20 parts water and one part wine
- b) Pliny: 8 parts water and one part wine
- c) Aristophanes: 3 parts water, one part wine
- d) Unos: 3 parts water, one part wine
- e) Wine that was mixed 1 part water and one part wine was considered barbarian.
- f) Average ratio was 3 parts water and one part wine

2. *Wine among the Jews*

The Jewish Talmud indicates that wine in the paschal meal (which was what Jesus ate at the last supper) was three parts water and one part wine.

3. *The maximum alcohol content of wine by nature is only about 14-15% by volume.*

When this level is reached in the fermentation process, the yeast is destroyed by the alcohol, no more fermentation takes place, and no more alcohol is made. Therefore, the wine of ancient times was about 3 1/4 % alcohol or less.²

4. *Lack of alternate drinks.*

Water was normally not safe to drink by itself in ancient times unless it was boiled, filtered or combined with wine to help kill the germs.

5. Summary

- a) The wine referred to in the Bible was greatly diluted. It has been said that to consume the amount of alcohol in two martinis it would take about 22 glasses of New Testament Wine.
- b) Wine of today would be considered “strong drink” in Bible times, based on alcohol percentage.
- c) There were few alternatives in Bible times.

Present Situation

[Note: Statistics admittedly can be manipulated to suit one’s purpose, but the following are generally held to be true. We live in an alcoholic society!]³

1. There are more than 18 million alcoholics in the US.
2. In 1998, 38.4% of total traffic fatalities were alcohol related.
3. About 3 in every 5 Americans will be involved in an alcohol related crash at some time in their lives.
4. Alcohol related crashes cost society \$45 billion, this does not include pain, suffering, and lost quality of life. These indirect costs raised the alcohol related crash figure to a staggering \$16 billion dollars in 1993.
5. 24.5% of those who start drinking at age 17 or younger develop alcohol dependence
6. Alcohol kills more teenagers than all other drugs combined. It is a factor in the three leading causes of death among 15-24 year olds: accidents, homicides, and suicides.
7. Every year, about 12,000 people in the U.S. die from alcohol-related cirrhosis of the liver.
8. Estimated 3.3 million problem drinkers age 14-17.
9. Approximately 15% of all drinkers, or 1 in 7, will develop an alcohol abuse or dependence ("alcoholism") problem
10. Every day, more than 700,000 people in the United States receive alcoholism treatment.
11. The economic cost of alcohol abuse is about \$148 billion per year, including medical costs, lost productivity, crime, and losses resulting from premature death.
12. Based on victim perceptions, about 2.7 million violent crimes occurred each year in which victims were certain that the offender had been drinking
13. Fetal alcohol syndrome is the third leading cause of birth defects.
14. High percentage of child-abusing parents have drinking problems.

Applying Insights

1. Some arguments for drinking
 - a) The Bible does *not* say Christians cannot drink under any circumstance at any time.
 - b) Drinking provides taste, relaxation and enjoyment (fun?).
2. Some arguments against drinking
 - a) It easily can control us.
 - b) It lowers inhibitions, can open us up to sinful actions and thoughts.
 - c) Disturbs our equilibrium, rendering us prone to accidents, harming ourselves and others.
 - d) Does not make us sharper. If anything, makes us duller.
 - e) Our “freedom” can cause severe trouble for others who have a weakness in this area.
 - f) Alcohol can generate a false sense of security and well-being.
 - g) Alcohol can easily be used as an escape from reality.
 - h) Alcohol can easily become a crutch in social situations
 - i) Alcohol can cause physical problems:
 - (1) *Birth defects in children born to drinking parents.*
 - (2) *Cancer.*
 - (3) *Cirrhosis of the liver.*
 - (4) *Korsakov’s Psychosis (damaged brain cells). One shot of whiskey kills 2000 brain cell—you never form new brain cells after six years of age. The part of the brain that dies first are the inhibitory parts. (“Pastoral Counseling”, Dr. Paul Meier, Psychiatrist). Alcoholism also destroys the cerebellum (i.e. the motor center, touch, sensitivity)*
 - (5) *Delirium Tremens (DTs) - Shakiness, seizures, blackouts, cause by withdrawal from alcohol by an alcoholic. Visual hallucinations, visualize and feel bugs crawling all over them, etc. Often, coma results. If untreated, 50% would die.*
 - (6) *The suicide rate for alcoholics is seven times higher than general population.*
 - (7) *Alcohol is the number one drug problem in the U.S. and Canada (not marijuana, heroin, LSD, etc)*
 - (8) *There are plenty of wholesome, non-addictive, non-destructive beverages.*
 - (9) *We don’t need to purify our water with wine.*
 - (10) *We live in an alcoholic culture. Jesus did not live in this kind of society.*
 - j) One chance out of ten that if you drink you will become an alcoholic. How do you know if you aren’t that one? How many of us would fly a plane if one chance out ten we would crash?

3. Answers to the two main reasons for drinking alcoholic beverages:
 - a) Relaxation and enjoyment - these are the very things that lead to alcoholism and the other problems stated thus far. Alcohol is an inordinate means to relaxation and enjoyment. Better said, it is often an escape from dealing with problems through proper living.
 - b) Taste - there are many wholesome, non-addictive, non-abusive, alternatives drinks. Why risk all the above simply for taste? Alcohol provides relaxation and enjoyment, but at what expense and danger?
4. A case for abstinence
 - a) God wants us to have peace and real joy, not artificially.
 - b) It is an insult to the Holy Spirit for a Christian to seek the superficial pleasure of a drug or a drink when God has promised us permanent joy in the Holy Spirit.
 - c) Abstinence makes a strong statement of protest against the number one chemical substance abuse in our society today.
 - d) Abstinence is a practical demonstration of our love to those brothers and sisters in Christ around us who have a particular weakness toward alcoholism (Ro 14:15). This is not a shackle intended to deprive life of enjoyment. It is intended to unleash one of the Christian's greatest expressions of love towards another—voluntarily foregoing one's own "freedom" in order to circumvent another's enslavement.

CONCLUSION

Is the use of alcohol by the Christian permissible or lawful before God? That is not the right question. The real question is whether its use is profitable, edifying, excellent? The "positive" value of alcohol as a beverage is, at best, neutral (i.e. taste and enjoyment) and provides no positive encouragement or benefits in the Christian life. This in itself does not militate against its usage. But, alcohol has every danger, both potentially and actually, to hinder the Christian walk and result in physical, emotional and spiritual harm! Why risk so much for so little present momentary enjoyment?!

... but, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord ...

Eph. 5:19

¹ Note: Parts of this article adapted from a paper by Dr. Norman Geisler, 1982.

² See Wine and Beer Making Simplified, by H.E. Branery, p. 21.

³ Figures can be verified with the National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.