

The Use of Alcoholic Beverages

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church

For Christians, the use of alcoholic beverage has been a topic of zealous debate for close to two centuries, and the issue is no less heated today. Every believer must approach this issue with a sincere desire to know God's mind in the matter. Scripture, and Scripture alone, must be the final authority in determining our position.

Several positions have emerged from the debate among evangelical Christians. Some advocate the *prohibitionist* position which opposes *all* consumption of alcoholic beverage. Other believers maintain the *abstentionist* point of view, which holds that due to cultural changes (i.e., stronger alcohol, automobiles, and alcoholism), Christians should abstain from alcohol use. A third position held by Bible-believing Christians is the *moderationist* view, which allows for the righteous consumption of alcoholic beverages. Moderationists acknowledge, deplore, and condemn all forms of alcohol abuse and dependency, while maintaining that the Bible allows the consuming of alcoholic beverages *in moderation* and with circumspection.

Drinking and Drunkenness

It is clear that the perspective of Scripture is that drunkenness is a sinful state that merits God's disapproval. The three positions mentioned above are in agreement on this point. The Scriptures frequently condemn drunkenness without reservation. Eight different scriptural angles of condemnation are surveyed below which demonstrate the Bible's position on alcohol abuse:

1. Drunkenness is expressly condemned in Scripture. (Eph. 5:18; Rom. 13:13; Gal. 5:19,21; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10; Prov. 23:20).
2. Drunkenness is a curse on man. (Jer.13:13-14; Ezek. 23:28,33; Prov. 23:21; Nah. 1:9-10; Hab. 2:15-16; Lam. 4:21-22).
3. Drunkenness distorts one's perception of God's world. (Prov. 23:29-30,33; Jer. 25:16; Isa. 28:7; Hos. 4:11; Luke 21:34).
4. Drunkenness destroys one's vocational capacity. (Prov. 31:4-5; Isa. 5:22-23; 28:6-7; Prov. 23:20-21).
5. Drunkenness is socially disgusting. (Isa. 28:7-8; Jer. 25:27; Ps. 107:27; Job 12:25; Prov. 20:1; 23:29-30).
6. Drunkenness weakens the body. (Gen. 2:7; Ps. 139:13-15; Job 10:8-12; Eccl. 11:5; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:16; Prov. 23:30,32; Hos. 7:5a; Isa. 19:14c; Eph. 5:29).
7. Drunkenness corrupts morals. (Gen. 9:21; 19:32-38; Lam. 4:21; Joel 3:3; Isa. 5:11-12; Rom. 13:13; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Pet. 4:3-4).
8. Drunkenness bars one from church leadership. (1 Tim. 3:2-3,7-8; Titus 2:3; Heb. 13:17; 2 Tim. 2:2-26).¹

While it is abundantly clear that the Bible condemns all forms of alcohol abuse and dependency, both by law and example,² one must be careful to avoid wrongly equating drunkenness with drinking. Therefore, it is the position of Grace Covenant Church that the Scriptures allow the

¹ Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *The Christian And Alcoholic Beverages, A Biblical Perspective* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1977), pp.21-28.

² See, for example: Gen. 9:21; 19:32; 1 Sam. 1:14-15; Prov. 23:20,21,29-35; Is. 28:1; 29:9; 49:26; 51:21; Jer.13:13-14; 23:9; 25:27; 51:7; Ezek. 23:28,33; Hos. 4:11; Joel 1:5; Matt. 24:29; Luke 12:45; 21:34; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10; Gal. 5:19,21; Eph. 5:18.

righteous and moderate use of alcoholic beverages. We believe the fundamental question is an ethical one that requires an answer from the Bible, not from an emotional base.

The *prohibitionist* and the *abstentionist* positions unintentionally, but negatively affect certain important aspects of the Christian faith in several ways. First, they can undercut the *authority of Scripture*. Anytime believers universally condemn what Scripture allow, the authority of Scripture in Christian thought is diminished.

Second, the *prohibitionist* and the *abstentionist* positions may distort the doctrine of Christ. When we universally condemn in others something Jesus Himself did, it detracts from His holiness. Finally, they adversely affect our defense of the faith. This is true because any denunciation of what Scripture allows sets forth an inconsistent Biblical witness.

Our Presuppositions:

Our position on the issue of the use of alcoholic beverage involves three presuppositions:

1) The Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Therefore 2) the Bible is the determinative and binding standard for all ethical inquiry. And 3) the Bible condemns all forms of alcohol abuse and dependence. Our moderationist viewpoint in no way compromises any of these three fundamental commitments.

The Wine Of The Bible

Undoubtedly, the starting point for any rational discussion of the matter must be with the nature of the wine in Scripture. The moderationist position is that the wine righteously employed by, and allowed for consumption among God's people in the Bible, is a fermented quality, alcoholic content beverage. Consider the evidence for this assertion:

1. Lexical Consensus. The leading Old and New Testament lexicons and etymological dictionaries affirm that the major terms used of wine represent a fermented beverage. A "wine", not "grape juice." The most important terms for the debate that are employed in Scripture are *yayin* and *shekar* (Hebrew) and *oinos* (Greek).³
2. Translational Consensus. The major English translations of Scripture translate these words by English equivalents that bespeak alcoholic beverages, rather than terms such as "juice," "grape juice," and so forth. Translations include: "twine," "strong drink," "liquor," and "beer."⁴

³ See: Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew And English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), pp.406, 1016. Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), pp.303, 716. Joseph H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book, 1889), p.442. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 564. See the English "wine" in the *The Compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2:3788. See also such etymological dictionaries as John M'Clintock and James Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Baker, rep. 1969 t1887J). Carl Darling Buck, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Iudo-European Languages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Elsevier, 1966). Robert K. Barnhart, *The Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (Bronx, NY: H.W. Wilson, 1988).

⁴ Authorized Version (King James); American Standard Version, Moffart's Holy Bible: A New Translation; Revised Standard Version; New English Bible; Weymouth's New Testament in Modern Speech; Williams' In the Language of the People; Beck's *In the Language of Today*; Amplified Bible; New American Standard Bible; New International Version.

3. Lexical Relationship. One of the major words in the Bible is *shekar* (“strong drink,” NASB). It is the noun form of the verb *shakar*, which means “become drunk.”⁵ This is evidence of the inebriating capacity of *shekar*.
4. Contextual Usages. Many of the verses that condemn drunkenness (see footnote 2) make reference to such beverages as *yayin*, *shekar*, and *oinos*. In addition; *yayin* is said to “make glad the heart” in a number of places.⁶ This surely has reference to the effect of an alcoholic beverage, when used in moderation.⁷
5. Descriptive Reference. In certain places in Scripture the aging of the liquid express of the grape is specifically mentioned (Is. 25:5,6; Luke 5:39). Aging is an essential factor for wine to be alcoholic.⁸
6. *Circumspection Requirement*. On some occasions, “strong” Christians are instructed to forgo the use of wine (Rom. 14:21), when there is a serious likelihood of “destroying” (Rom. 14:15) a “weaker brother” (Rom. 14:1; 15:1). This surely indicates the temporary forgoing of an alcoholic beverage, rather than grape juice.
7. *Ecclesiastical Expectation*. Church officers are required to use wine in moderation (1 Tim. 3:8; Tit. 2:3), indicating its fermented quality and intoxicating capacity.
8. *Qualified Silence*. Interestingly, there are no Biblical distinctions between “safe” wines.⁹ Scripture lacks any commendation of “new wine” (fresh grape juice) over and exclusive of “old wine” (fermented beverages). Scripture lacks any commendation of watered wine (it even disparages water wine, Is. 1:22). Scripture lacks any encouragement to retarding fermentation, which occurs naturally. Evidence exists that wine was intentionally exposed in order to accelerate the fermentation process (Is. 25:6; Jer. 48:11).

Wine Use in the Bible

Having demonstrated the fermented quality (and consequently the inebriating potential) of the wine of the Bible, we will now set forth several Biblical evidences of its righteous employment.

1. Righteous Example. In Genesis 14:18 Melchizedek gave *yayin* to Abraham in righteous circumstances. There is no evidence of any divine disapprobation in this episode. (See also Neh. 5:16-19.)
2. Sacred Employment. The Scripture teaches that both *yayin* (Ex. 29:38ff) and *shekar* (Num. 28:7) were used for offerings to God. This is important for two reasons: 1) These (alcoholic) beverages had to be produced for worship and, 2) they were acceptable as offerings to God. If alcoholic beverages were unsuitable for human consumption, why were they acceptable in divine worship?
3. *Positive Blessing*. God’s Law allowed *yayin* and *shekar* to be purchased with the Tithe of Rejoicing and to be drunk before the Lord. “You shall spend that money for whatever your

⁵ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Lexicon*, p.1016

⁶ Judges 9:13; 2 Sam. 13:28; Est. 1:10; Ps. 104:14-15; Eccl. 9:7; 10:19; Zech. 9:15; 10:7.

⁷ Drunkenness does not ‘make glad the heart’ and is not spoken of in a righteous context for beverage consumption. Rather, it brings woe and sorrow (Prov. 23:29-35).

⁸ Of Isaiah 25:6, E. J. Young writes: “By means of graduation, Isaiah now characterizes the banquet as one of wine that is matured by resting undisturbed on the lees. A play upon words as well as a graduation appears between *shemanim* (fat things) and *shemarim* (lees). This later word originally signified holders or preservers and then came to designate the wines that had rested a long time on sediment or dregs, and so had become more valuable. The wine lay on the lees to increase its strength and color.” Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), 3:193.

⁹ Please notice that this argument from silence is put last. Nevertheless, it would seem that if there were a prohibition against the consumption of alcoholic beverages, there should be evidence in Scripture of the careful handling and production of grape juice in order to arrest fermentation.

heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine (*yayin*) or strong drink (*shekar*), for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household” (Deut. 14:26). In fact, the psalmist attributes to God the production of *yayin*, which makes man’s heart glad (Ps. 104:14-15). Surely God’s provision has in view a righteous employment of alcoholic beverage. Furthermore, Scripture speaks of the satisfaction of life as illustrated in the eating of bread and drinking of *yayin* with gladness (Eccl. 9:7).

4. *Spiritual Symbolism.* The rich symbolism of God’s redemptive revelation makes bold use of fermented beverages. The blessings of salvation are likened to free provision of *yayin*: “Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. yes, come buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Is. 55:1). *Kingdom blessings* are symbolized by the abundant provision of *yayin*: “‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the LORD, ‘when the plowman shall over-take the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed...; I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; . . . they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them’” (Amos 9:13-14). Elsewhere we read: “In this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees” (Is. 25:6). Clearly, wine—even carefully aged wine is viewed as a symbol of God’s blessings.
5. *Christ’s Witness.* Interestingly, our Lord Jesus Christ miraculously “manufactured” an abundance (John 2:6) of wine [*yayin*] for a marriage feast. This wine was deemed “good” by the headmaster of the feast (John 2:10)—and men prefer “old wine” (i.e. aged, fermented), because it is good (Luke 5:39). Having “manufactured” wine in His first miracle, it is no surprise that the Lord publicly drank it. This put a clear distinction between Him and the ascetic John the Baptist: “John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and a sinner!’” (Luke 7:33-35).
6. *Prohibitional Silence.* Scripture nowhere gives a universal command on the order: “take no wine at all.” In fact, select groups that forgo wine are worthy of mention as acting differently from accepted Biblical practice, e.g. the Nazarites (Num. 6:2-6), and John the Baptist (Luke 1:15). Others are forbidden to imbibe wine only during the formal exercise of their specific duties, e.g. priests (Lev. 10:8-11) and kings (Prov. 31:4,5).

All prohibitions to partaking wine involve prohibitions either to immoderate consumption or to abusers: “Be not drunk with wine” (Eph. 5:18). “Do not be heavy drinkers” (Prov. 23:20). “Do not be addicted to wine.” (1 Tim. 3:8; Titus 2:3). “Do not linger long over wine (Prov. 23:30).

Summary

When all is said and done, we must distinguish the *use* of wine from its *abuse*. Sometimes in Scripture gluttonous partaking of food is paralleled with immoderate drinking of wine (Deut. 21:20; Prov. 23:21). But food is not universally prohibited! Sometimes in Scripture sexual perversion is paralleled with drunkenness (Rom. 13:13; 1 Peter 4:3), but all sexual activity is not condemned! Wealth often becomes a snare to the sinner (1 Tim. 6:9-11), but the Scripture does not universally decry its acquisition (Job 42:10-17)! Each of these factors in life is intended by God to be a blessing for man, when used according to His righteous Law.

It would seem abundantly clear, then, that *the Scriptures do allow the moderate partaking of alcoholic beverages*. There is no hesitancy in Scripture in commending wine, nor embarrassment in portraying its consumption among the righteous of Biblical days. Wine is set before the saints as

blessing and gladness (Deut. 14:26; Ps. 104:14-15), even though it may be to the immoderate and wicked a mocker and curse (Prov. 20:1; 23:29ff.).¹⁰

A Summary of Principles from Romans 14

The following is a summary of principles drawn from Romans, chapter 14, which deals with the subject of Christian liberty:

1. Within the church there are Christians at all levels of growth and maturation. Some are weak in the faith (vv. 1, 2, 23; 15:1), whether due to newness in the faith (1 Peter 2:2) or to “spiritual retardation,” for whatever reasons (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Yet others are strong in the faith (vv. 2, 13, 22; 15:1). This is undoubtedly the case not only in the Roman situation, but in every church throughout the course of church history.
2. The strong are obligated by apostolic command to fully accept the weak into their Christian fellowship and community (vv. 1, 3, 10; 15:1). Christianity is not elitist. We are all members of the body of Christ through his sovereign action in overcoming our sinful rebellion, not by our own wisdom, effort, or purity. yet the weak are also under apostolic obligation to not criticize the strong for their God-approved convictions (vv. 3,4,10). “Affirmative action” is not a biblical ideal.
3. The Lord, and the Lord alone, is the only Lord of an individual’s conscience (vv. 3, 4, 7-9, 12-13, 22). To him we stand or fall; to him must we give a final account. And the Lord has not left us to grope in darkness regarding his will for us. He has given us his word to direct us in the paths of righteousness. We must live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God, not man.
4. As long as we hold to something as a devout and religious conviction, we are obligated to consistency in the living out of that conviction (vv. 5, 12, 22-23). The essence of sin is living against God; and if we truly and deeply believe something to be of God, we must live in terms of that belief.
5. We are not to censoriously judge a fellow believer in “things indifferent” (vv. 10, 13, 19). If a particular action is not forbidden by either express command or clear principle derived by good and necessary inference from Scripture, then we cannot judge those who engage in such actions.
6. The strong one must not abuse his Christian liberty so as to entice, prompt, or ensnare weaker Christians into sinning against their own deeply rooted convictions. That is, the stronger believer must be careful to not put the weaker believer in a position in which he will actually do what he is convinced is morally or spiritually wrong (vv. 13, 15, 16, 20-23). This would be to tempt the weaker brother into an attitudinal sin.” That is, even though the action itself is not sinful, the fact that the weaker brother believes it to be sinful makes it a sin for him. He would then be doing something that he felt was rebellious before God.
7. There is nothing in God’s creation that is intrinsically evil. Evil is a moral condition operative in persons, whether angelic, human, or otherwise. It is not a material property somehow rooted intangible creation (vv. 14, 20). (See Mark 7: 1-15, 21-23.)
8. Love and peace should characterize Christian relations (vv. 15,17,19). We are all brothers in Christ, members of one body. We must therefore work together as a body to the glory of God.
9. There are certain occasions where it may be best to temporarily and voluntarily abstain from certain things (e.g., wine, meat, and so on) that are otherwise good—if there is a real danger

¹⁰ This entire section was taken (slightly adapted) from an article by Kenneth Gentry, Jr. in the “Issue And Interchange” section of *Antithesis*, Vol.11, No.2, 1991, pp.41-43.

of luring a weaker Christian into a situation in which he will act contrary to the dictates of his moral and spiritual conscience (v. 21; cf. 1 Cor. 8:13).

10. The strong should rejoice in their knowledge of God's approval (vv. 18, 22) and should gently and patiently seek to win the weak to a stronger position (cf. 15:1; 1 Cor. 9:20-23). Unfortunately, it is too often the case that the strong are expected to come around to the weaker brother's position, thereby confirming him in his weakness.¹¹

Conclusion

It is abundantly clear that the Scripture does not demand either universal total abstinence or prohibition. Although it is the case that alcoholic beverages can be, have been, and are presently abused by individuals, such need not be the case. Indeed, the biblical record frequently and clearly speaks of alcoholic beverages as good gifts from God to be enjoyed by man. Unfortunately, as is always the case among sinners, good things are often transformed into curses. This is true not only with alcohol but with sex, wealth, authority, and many other areas of life.

The reader should not conclude that our position seeks to encourage anyone to drink who does not presently do so. We never encourage others to drink. Whether the individual wants to drink is a matter of his tastes and discretion (within biblical limits, of course). God's word is the final authority in every area of life.

¹¹ Gentry, *The Christian And Alcoholic Beverages*, pp. 90-93. [For a further exposition of Romans 14 as it applies to this issue, refer to Gentry's book.