

A Biblical Study on Alcohol and Drinking

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Fellowship Bible Church
by Matthew A. Postiff, Ph.D.

Introduction

It is often said (and rightly) that the Bible does not have a statement that plainly forbids the use of alcohol. However, this is an area where people hold strong feelings, some one way and some another. But is this a “gray area”? The Bible does have a lot to say about alcohol, its effect, and its associations. We go to the infallible rule for faith and practice, the Bible, to see what it says, instead of relying on feelings or opinions.

To quickly summarize what we believe at Fellowship Bible Church, we quote the leadership covenant: “As spiritual leaders and teachers, our example is of great importance to others. Therefore, we willingly promise to abstain from practices which may be a harmful example and therefore wisely avoided. In this category we include dancing, drinking of alcoholic beverages, ...”

Word Study

OT Words for Alcoholic Drinks

shekar <07941> – strong drink, strong wine, drunkard. Strongly or intensely fermented intoxicating liquor. Used of drink offering. Used 23 times.

yayin <03196> – wine. From a root meaning to effervesce. Most common word for wine, used 138 times in the OT. Intoxicating character confirmed by Rabbinical writings. At the Passover, for example, water was mixed with the wine used during the meal because it was too strong to be drunk alone. Probably yayin is less alcoholic than shekar.

tirosh, tiyrowsh <08492> – fresh or new wine, freshly pressed grape juice, sweet wine, must. Rarely fermented wine. Used 38 times.

`asis, `aciyc <06071> - sweet wine, pressed out juice, fresh grape juice. From the root “to tread”, indicating the process of pressing/trodding that yields the juice. Not necessarily unfermented. Used 5 times.

chamar <02562> - wine. A word of Aramaic origin. Used 6 times.

mesek <04538> - mixture, well-mixed. This is wine mixed with water or aromatics. Usually a bad usage, where other drugs are mixed in to produce a more powerful effect. Used only in Ps. 75:8

NT Words for Alcoholic Drinks

oinos <3631> – wine derived from grapes. Of Hebrew origin (yayin). Fermentation is implied in passages such as Matthew 9:17 where wineskins are said to burst. Used 33 times.

sikera <4608> – intensely fermented liquor, strong drink, an intoxicating beverage, different from wine; it was a artificial product, made of a mixture of sweet ingredients, whether derived from grain and vegetables, or from the juice of fruits (dates), or a decoction of honey. Of Hebrew origin (*shekar*). Used only in Luke 1:15.

gleukos <1098> – from the root *glukus*, sweet. Grape juice, pressed juice from the grape, must. Only used in Acts 2:13. Related to the word “sweet” used in James 3:11,12 and Revelation 10:9,10. Highly inebriating (indicated in Strong’s and by the usage in Acts 2:13, unless ironical).

Genema tes ampelou – fruit of the vine, Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18. This is in connection with the last supper. It may simply be grape juice.

oxos <3690> - sour wine or vinegar mixed with water, used by Roman soldiers, Matthew 27:34, 48, Mark 15:36, Luke 23:36, John 19:29, 30.

OT Words for Drunkenness

shakar <07937> - to be or become drunken or intoxicated

ravah <07301> - to be satiated or saturated, to have or drink one’s fill

shikkowr <07910> - drunken

shathah <08354> - imbibe, drink, drunk, to drink or to feast

NT Words for Drunkenness

oinophlugia <3632> – an overflow, surplus, excess of wine, drunkenness. A prolonged condition of drunkenness, a debauch. Root *oinos*.

paroinos <3943> – given to wine, staying near wine. Root *oinos*.

methusko <3182>, **methuo** <3184> - to be drunken or intoxicated

Related English Words

debauch – to lead astray morally; to corrupt; dissipation; indulgence in one’s appetites, esp. for sensual pleasure.

must – the juice pressed from grapes or other fruit before it has fermented; new wine.

Notice Differentiation of the Terms

Wine and strong drink are used together in Luke 1:5, indicating a difference between them. Wine and strong drink are used together in a large number of OT passages, sometimes in a clearly distinguished manner: Lev. 10:9, Numbers 6:3, Deut. 14:26, 29:6, Judges 13:4,7,14, 1 Sam. 1:15, Prov. 20:1, 31:4, 31:6, Is. 5:11, 22, 24:9, 28:7, 29:9, 56:12, Micah 2:11. The indication is that wine is of a less intoxicating nature than strong drink.

Effects and Associations of Alcoholic Drinks

The Bible lists many effects of wine, either directly or by example. Sometimes these seem to be cast in a positive light, as with Solomon seeking pleasure through wine (Eccl. 2:3). A number of places in Scripture talk about the provision of God, wine being among them (Gen. 27:28, Deut. 28:39, Ps. 104:15). A large number of verses talk of wine in terms of drink offerings and other sacred uses (Ex. 29:40, Num. 28:7). It was connected with judgment in that the Jewish

custom was to give medicated wine to criminals before their punishment. Here are some of the other negative associations:

Mocking and rage – Prov. 20:1

Erring effect on vision and judgment – Is. 28:7

Forgetting the law and perversion of judgment – Prov. 31:5

Addicting effect – Is. 5:11

“Take away the heart” – Hos. 4:11. The idea is to capture or to steal the heart.

Makes the heart “merry” (effect of drunkenness) – 1 Sam. 25:36

Nakedness – Gen. 9:20-24, Hab. 2:15-16

Sexual immorality – Gen. 19:30-38

It overcomes a man – Jer. 23:9, Is. 28:1

Idolatry – Dan. 5:4. Rev. 14:8 and Jer. 51:7 also. Pagan religious practices also.

Makes “sick” – Hos. 7:5

Causes to buy and sell for its sake – Joel 3:3

Any amount of alcohol begins to have these effects!

Medicinal Uses

Prov. 31:6-7

1 Tim. 5:23

Advice from the Wisdom Literature

Don't be deceived by wine or strong drink – Prov. 20:1

Riches not there – Prov. 21:17

Woe and sorrow, etc. to the ones who sit long at wine – Prov. 23:30,31

Not for leaders because it will pervert judgment - Prov. 31:4,5

The High Calling of Separation

Priests

Priests shall not partake before performing ministry – Lev. 10:9-11, Ez. 44:21

This is a higher standard and is specifically for the purpose of serving God-note the words “difference” and “teach.” Believers are priests as well, with full-time access to God – 1 Peter 2:5, 9, Rev. 1:6.

The Nazarite Vow

Numbers 6:1-21, Amos 2:11-12

Samson

Judges 13:5, 7, 16:17

John the Baptist

Apparently also a Nazarite – Luke 1:5, 7:33. In 1:5, notice “shall” is used three times. His greatness, his separation from wine and strong drink, and his filling with the Holy Spirit are told in this verse

Greatest among men – Luke 7:28

The Rechabites

Jeremiah 35:1-19 – The Rechabite example of following their father’s command is commended. They drank no wine, like Nazarites. The Lord chastens Israel because they, unlike the Rechabites, have not listened to their God.

Pastors and Deacons

1 Tim. 3:3, 3:8, Titus 1:7 all exhort that Pastors and Deacons, those in leadership positions in the church, are not to be “given” to wine. Titus 2:3 says the same for the older women. The phrase “given to wine”, *paroinos*, means “lingering near wine.” Perhaps this phrase is used because of the low alcoholic content of wine in NT times would require that one linger over the wine for a long time if one intended to get drunk by it.

Ephesians 5:18

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.

Drunkenness is plainly forbidden. The word excess is *asotia*, a hopeless, incurable sickness, debauchery, uncontrolled dissipation, an abandoned, dissolute life. Presumed to come from “a” (not), and *sozo*, to be safe from injury, peril, perishing, danger, destruction. The command “be filled” is a present imperative. Literally, “be kept filled all the time.”

It is instructive to notice the comparison made between drunkenness and filling of the Spirit. In the same way that alcohol controls ones actions, Paul is exhorting us to allow the Holy Spirit to control our actions, to have full control of us. The principle is clear – instead of giving yourself over to wine, give yourself to God!

1 Peter 4:3 talks of the time before being saved, when Peter’s audience was involved in all kinds of sinful behavior (“the will of the Gentiles”); drunkenness was one of those (*oinophlugia*).

Some Questions

Some of these questions are due to a study done by John MacArthur on Eph. 5:18-21.

1. What kinds of places serve alcohol or where would I drink it? Are these good places to be?
2. Are the alcoholic beverages today the same as in Bible times?

Wine or new wine had probably less than 2.5% alcohol content. By comparison, modern-day beer has about 4%, wine 9-11%, and hard drinks 15% or more. Modern

fermentation and distillation technology are much more advanced and can produce more intoxicating drinks.

3. Are alcoholic beverages necessary?

Not with the huge number of other non-intoxicating and non-habit forming beverages. The medicinal value of wine can be gotten from grape juices and extracts; old-time medicinal uses have been superseded by newer and far more effective drugs.

4. Is drinking the best choice? Php. 1:10

5. Is drinking habit forming? 1 Cor. 6:12

6. Is drinking potentially destructive?

7. Is drinking offensive to other Christians? Rom. 14:21

8. Will it diminish your Christian testimony?

9. Do you feel comfortable with drinking?

10. Is it something you want to be associated with? What is *it* associated with?

11. Is drinking glorifying to God? 1 Cor. 10:31

12. Does it edify others? 1 Cor. 10:23

13. Is avoiding wine pleasing to the Lord?

Deut. 29:6 and the Rechabite example in Jeremiah 35 are instructive here.

What I Have Learned From This Study

1. The study of alcohol and drinking is closely tied with general *sanctification*. Note the uses of the phrase “separate unto the Lord” in Numbers 6:1-21 regarding the Nazarite vow. A basic understanding of the separation that God desires from worldly things unto himself aids in the understanding of the separation desirable from alcoholic drink. Clearly the separation is *from* wine and strong drink in that passage, and several times it is mentioned separation *unto* the LORD.
2. Saying that you desire to take alcoholic beverage seems like it is saying that you do not want to be separated unto the Lord. In the least, this attitude casts some shadow on whether you are sincere in your effort to be separated unto God because it is like saying “I want to be separated unto the Lord but I want to partake of worldly pleasures also.”
3. The terms “wine” and “strong drink” are clearly differentiated in the Bible.
4. The proper uses of wine and strong drink are outlined in the Bible very clearly. Note that these are USES, not ABUSES. Prov. 31:6 and 1 Tim. 5:23 are clear on this.
5. There is a way to ride the fence on this issue, claiming it is a “gray area” and using that to justify any conclusion. But any proper conclusion should be rendered from sound Biblical judgment. Rom. 14:23 – do all things in faith!
6. This riding on the fence is dangerous business, obviously. The slippery slope of alcoholic beverages is obvious as well. Instead of looking at the whole topic towards the middle, with a view toward “academic soundness,” why not point your vision to one of the endpoints. Would you rather be drunken or separated unto God? Following the ways of the world or the pure and holy ways of God? This should make your choice easy. Anything that takes you toward utmost purity to the Lord should be your heart’s desire. Instead of holding as the most precious desire the ways of intellectual inquiry and rationalization, heed the warnings of Scripture and the desire of God to be first place in your life and avoid all practices that would hinder you from that goal.

7. A difficulty arises in different cultures, such as France, where alcohol is often taken with meals. But Bible truth is not dependent on culture, time, or place. Based on Scriptural principles it is wise to avoid wine and the like.
8. It is highly doubtful that the wine mentioned in the Bible is as alcoholic as even weakly alcoholic beverages of today. It would be more proper to call it “grape juice.” You might ask, “how do you know this?” The Bible indicates it in several passages: Acts 2:14, where Peter mentions that it is only 9am in the morning, not enough time for the men to get drunk who were speaking in tongues. Weakly alcoholic beverage would take some time to cause drunkenness. Also 1 Tim 3:3, where the Pastor is not to be addicted to wine, or “lingering near the wine.” Again the indication is that it would take some time to be near the wine to be exhibiting an addiction to it. So, one may say, that means I can have a little wine and then leave it alone! NO! The point we are trying to make is not the time near the wine, but that Bible wine was very weak, far weaker than wine in our day, and weaker even than beer.
9. Can I give one GOOD reason why I SHOULD have a drink? I’ve found that many look for an excuse on this issue instead of sitting down and giving an accounting of the positive reasons why they would do so. Send me your best try—but I think you’ll find that prayerful reflection on this topic, and the associated Scriptures, will move you directly away from alcohol consumption instead of toward it!