

Christians and Alcohol

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Introduction

The question of alcohol consumption has been problematic for believers from the beginning. The first recorded use of alcohol in the Bible, by Noah in Genesis 9, led to his shameful drunkenness. And of course Christians in Corinth were reprimanded by Paul for getting drunk at love feasts associated with the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:21).

Given the Bible’s clear stand against drunkenness (i.e., drunkards will not inherit the Kingdom of God, Galatians 5:21), Christians today nevertheless pose the question: “Is it not permissible for believers to drink *in moderation*?” –with the difference being one of degree.

In this paper we examine the nature of alcohol; using biblical context, we demonstrate that there are distinctions in wines; we also consider the high calling God has placed on kings, priests, and Christians.

We conclude that the permissibility of drinking *is not even the right question to focus on*; rather one should honestly address whether or not he personally believes God capable of contradicting His Word.

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Where Alcohol Comes From: The Process of Fermentation

- Fermentation is the putrefaction of plant matter. It involves the slow decomposition of organic substances induced by micro-organisms such as yeast and bacteria.
- For example, in making alcoholic wine, yeast is allowed to feed on the sugar in grape juice and excrete alcohol and carbon dioxide.
- When the alcohol content reaches perhaps 15% concentration, the yeast colony is poisoned and dies.
- If fermentation is avoided (through boiling, filtration, et al), wine can remain sweet and alcohol-free.

Alcohol's Notorious Impact on Health

- Alcohol in Drug Addiction: alcohol is classified as *an addictive drug* by the American Medical Association (AMA policy H-30.972).
- Alcohol and Pregnancy: drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause physical and mental birth defects. Furthermore, *no level* of alcohol use during pregnancy is considered safe for the fetus.¹
- Alcohol and the Liver: "Alcohol itself is toxic to the liver..."²
- Alcohol and the Brain: "Alcohol is a neurotoxin associated with significant morbidity and mortality."³
- Alcohol and Cancer: "A beer a day may raise risk of several cancers."^{4a}
"Just a Few Drinks a Week Boosts Breast Cancer Risk."^{4b}
- Red wine for good health: "The same antioxidants found in red wine can also be obtained from unfermented grape juice, and without the hazards related to alcohol"⁵

Two Kinds of Wine in Scripture

- Generic words translated "wine"
- The role of *context* in distinguishing which kind of wine

Generic words for wine

In modern times, when we hear the word "wine" we automatically think *alcohol*; that's because nowadays we speak specifically of "juice" when referring to an unfermented fruit drink. However, in Bible times, the same generic words were used for **both** fermented (alcoholic) wine **and** unfermented (non-alcoholic, sweet)

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wine. Consider the Old Testament Hebrew words *yayin* and *shakar*, and the New Testament Greek word *oinos*⁶.

Hence, context plays a central role determining which type of “wine” is under discussion in a given Bible verse. This can be a very liberating truth for modern Christians, who may be perplexed about seeming contradictions in the Bible’s stance on alcohol.

The role of context in distinguishing *which* kind of wine

I. Fermented wine

Regarding the importance of context, consider these references to what is obviously fermented wine:

Proverbs 20:1a

Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler.

Proverbs 23

31 **Do not gaze at wine** when it is red,
when it sparkles [effervesces?] in the cup,
when it goes down smoothly!
32 In the end it bites like a snake
and poisons like a viper.

II. Unfermented wine

On the other hand, the following are unmistakably references to *unfermented* wine:

Isaiah 65:8

Thus says the LORD,

"As the new **wine is found in the cluster**,

And one says, 'Do not destroy it, for there is benefit in it,'

So I will act on behalf of My servants

In order not to destroy all of them.

Isaiah 27:2-3

In that day,

"A vineyard of wine, sing of it!

"I, the LORD, am its keeper; I water it every moment so that no one will damage it, I guard it night and day.

Isaiah 16:10

Joy and gladness are taken away from the orchards; no one sings or shouts in the vineyards; no one **treads out wine** at the presses, for I have put an end to the shouting.

Jeremiah 40:12

And they **harvested an abundance of wine** and summer fruit.

Jeremiah 48:33

Joy and gladness are gone from the orchards and fields of Moab. I have stopped **the flow of wine from the presses**; no one treads them with shouts of joy. Although there are shouts, they are not shouts of joy.

Matthew 26:29, Mark 14:25, Luke 22:18

"I tell you, I will not **drink** of this fruit **of the vine** from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

Christians and Alcohol

- Kings and Priests (kingdom of priests)
- Timothy and alcohol
- Elders and alcohol

Kings and Priests (kingdom of priests)

God's people are identified in the Old Testament as "a kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6), and in the New Testament as "kings and priests" (Revelation 1:6; 5:10).

What implication does this have on Christians regarding the use of alcohol? Can any counsel or exhortation be inferred?

Consider:

- A. In Leviticus 10:8-11, regarding restrictions on *priests* serving before God, the Lord tells Aaron "**Drink no wine or strong drink**, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a

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statute forever throughout your generations. You are *to distinguish between* the holy and the common, and *between* the unclean and the clean....”

- B. In Proverbs 31, the king is told by his mother that “...O Lemuel, **it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink**, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.”

Timothy and alcohol

That Timothy totally abstained from all wine products can be concluded from Paul’s exhortation: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (1 Timothy 5:23).

What *cannot* be concluded is that Timothy subsequently began to use alcohol. (He may have originally been using only water precisely to avert supposition that a wine he drank might be of the fermented variety.)

Elders and alcohol

1 Timothy 3:2-3a (KJV)

“A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine....”

“Not given to wine. --The Greek is mee-paroinon: ...Literally, not at, by, near, or with wine. This looks considerably like total abstinence...’Not given to wine’ is certainly a very liberal translation, and shows how the usages of the day unconsciously influenced the translators.”⁶

Christ and Alcohol

- The symbolism at the Wedding at Cana
- The symbolism at Passover and The Lord’s Supper

The symbolism at the Wedding at Cana

What was Jesus saying through this event? We read in the account of Jesus’ first miracle (John 2), that he employed six stone water jars on hand--jars normally used “for the Jewish rites of purification.” We Christians recognize that rituals

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with water cannot purify us. Only the blood of Jesus can truly cleanse from sin (see, e.g., Hebrews 13:12).

So was not “the blood of the grape” (Gen. 49:11, Deut. 32:14), offered to the invited guests from those purification jars, symbolic of our need to be purified in Jesus’ (soon to be shed) Blood? Was it not symbolic of the Blood necessary to qualify for entrance to The Wedding of the Lamb (Rev. 19:7)?

If this is so, then consider further: in Exodus 34:25 the Lord commanded, “**You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened**, or let the sacrifice of the Feast of the Passover remain until the morning.”

Knowing this, would Jesus, our Passover Lamb, have created alcoholic (leavened) wine for this important symbolic event?

(And *what if* a pregnant woman were in attendance at the wedding that day; would the omniscient God create and offer her alcohol, which could be harmful to her fetus?)

The symbolism at Passover and The Lord’s Supper

The Old Testament does not mention a cup for Passover--only the lamb, unleavened bread, and bitter herbs. **Nevertheless** the Israelites received a clear injunction against having yeast (which causes fermentation in both bread dough and fruit juice) *anywhere* in their houses during the celebration; the punishment for disobedience was to be “cut off from Israel” (Exodus 12:15). Hence, any wine taken during the celebration could not possibly be fermented.

Recall that during the Last Supper (a Passover meal), Jesus describes the beverage as “the fruit of the vine,” instead of referring to it with only a generic Greek word for “wine,” like *oinos*.

And when Paul examines the elements of the Lord’s Supper--the bread representing Christ’s body, and the cup, His blood (1 Cor. 11), he says “the cup,” instead of using a generic Greek word for “wine,” like *oinos*.

Remember that Acts 13:37 states “He [Jesus] whom God raised *did not undergo decay*.” Question: Would fermented wine best represent Christ’s pure, uncorrupted blood, *or* would unaltered juice from the grape?

A final, but most important point for this section: At the Last Supper, “Christ, our Passover Lamb” (provided by God himself) knew he was about to be crucified. But Exodus 34:25 says “You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the sacrifice of the Feast of the Passover remain until the morning.” If Christ had had *leavened* wine in his body from that meal, he would have been *disqualified* as our Passover sacrifice.

Christ and His Word

Now to the true crux of this matter, which is (as is often the case) not related so much to the weight of the *evidence*, as to the *attitude* of the heart.

Let us be honest: the taste for alcohol is an acquired taste.

Let us be honest: one must allow that God can contradict His own Word if one accepts as divine, **on the one hand**, the warning not to gaze at (alcoholic) wine; that (alcoholic) wine “bites like a snake and poisons like a viper”; that it is a “mocker”; **and yet on the other hand** maintains that Christ—“the Word made flesh”—produced or consumed alcoholic wine.

To brethren caught in this position we lovingly say, “Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar...” (Romans 3:4).

Footnotes

¹In fact, no level of alcohol use during pregnancy has been proven safe. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can cause physical and mental birth defects.” (http://www.marchofdimes.com/professionals/681_1170.asp)

²“Alcohol itself is toxic to the liver, even when nutrition is adequate.” (<http://www.medhelp.org/NIHlib/GF-173.html>)

³“Alcohol and the Brain.” *British Journal of Hospital Medicine*, 1997; 57: 543-51. (See also <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurotoxin>)

^{4a}

1) World Cancer Research Fund: “A pint of beer a day increases liver and bowel cancer risk by a fifth.” (http://www.wcrf-uk.org/audience/media/press_release.php?recid=9)

2) McGill University: "A beer a day may raise risk of several cancers."
(<http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSTRE57M2AZ20090823>)

^{4b}Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA): "Just a Few Drinks a Week Boosts Breast Cancer Risk."
(<http://healthland.time.com/2011/11/02/just-a-few-drinks-a-week-can-boost-breast-cancer-risk/?iid=WBeditorspicks>)

⁵Professor Ira Goldberg, American Heart Association.
(<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/health/1130591.stm>)

⁶*Bible Wines: Laws of Fermentation.* Rev. William Patton, D.D.
Kessinger Publishing Company Whitefish, MT 2003.