

# Christians And Alcohol

by Casey Head

Christians often struggle with the subject of social drinking. Many wonder if it is acceptable to drink occasionally or to have a glass of wine with their dinner, while others *assume* that all forms of drinking are perfectly harmless...so long as the point of drunkenness is not reached. What does the Bible say about alcohol? Is all-out drunkenness the only sin related to alcohol consumption? It may surprise you, but the Bible says a lot more about drinking than most people think.

First of all, let us discuss the nature of New Testament wine. In other words, when the Bible speaks of “wine,” what is under consideration? You see, we use the word “wine” differently than did the people of the first century. To us, wine is an intoxicating drink and is usually thought of in connection to elegant and romantic events. Many may even picture a tall, slender glass bottle. While in the first century, “wine” could refer to an intoxicating beverage, it could also refer to unfermented grape juice. The Lord says in Isaiah 65:8, “As the *new wine* is found *in the cluster*.” In this verse, the word “wine” obviously refers to fresh juice, as the cluster does not yield fermented juice. The word “wine” is derived from the Greek word “oinos,” and refers simply to the product of the grape vine- whether fermented or unfermented. When you see the word “wine” used in the New Testament, the context must be examined to discern whether an alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverage is under consideration.

It was common practice in the first century to dilute wine with 3-20 parts water, depending on the alcohol content of the wine. In other words, if they had wine that was moderately fermented, they might add ten parts water to one part wine. This was the common beverage of that time period. The maximum alcohol content of their fermented wine was 11-12%, and they considered this to be strong drink. They would have added a lot of water to this highly fermented beverage in order to significantly reduce the alcohol content, if they even used it at all! Clearly, they tried to avoid intoxication. While many today believe that the first century people drank straight, fermented wine every day, the above facts have proven that they did not.

The first century people utilized many methods to prevent or reverse the fermentation process. They used filtering and boiling methods, subsidence, temperature control, air exclusion, sulphur methods, evaporation, antiseptics and sophisticated fumigation methods. Fresh wine (grape juice) could be obtained easily and even preserved to a certain extent. This proves again that the ancient people made great efforts to avoid alcoholic wine.

In the first century, their fermentation process was entirely natural, and as mentioned above, the maximum alcohol content of their wine could reach 11-12%. The modern fermentation process which allows for increased alcohol content was not invented until the Middle Ages. Our alcoholic drinks today are MUCH stronger than those of the first century. Modern beer and wine would compare to their straight wine and strong drink, both of which were forbidden and viewed as being “barbaric” drinks. Our strong liquors, which can have anywhere from 40-75% alcohol content never existed before the Middle Ages and would have been unthinkable to the ancient people. How can Christians possibly try to justify modern alcoholic drinks with these points in mind?

Now that we have discussed the nature of New Testament wine, let us consider several New Testament passages which condemn various forms of drinking. You may be surprised to discover that the Bible says quite a lot about drinking. Not only is drunkenness plainly condemned in the scriptures, but lesser degrees of drinking also are forbidden!

In Romans 13:13, Paul says, “Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and *drunkenness*, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.” At first glance, this verse only appears to condemn all-out drunkenness, a point that most will agree with; but let us look more closely at the word “drunkenness.” This word comes from the Greek word “methe,” which means “intoxication.” What is intoxication? It is defined as, “The condition of impaired judgement, disordered senses and enhanced emotions, as a result of deliberately taking some toxic substance into

the body...for personal pleasure.” In other words, when a person’s judgement is impaired by some toxic substance, in this case, alcohol, they are intoxicated, or “drunk.” Now the question is simple—at one point does a person’s judgement become impaired by alcohol? According to the UNC Highway Safety Research Center, while the legal limit is .08%, a person’s judgement is impaired and their cognitive functions affected at .04%. Another source says that impairment begins at .02%. For the average man, this can occur with as little as one or two beers or half a glass of wine. A person may not FEEL very impaired at this point, but according to secular research, they are impaired. Paul’s admonition in Romans 13:13 condemns even small amounts of alcohol.

Furthermore, in Galatians 5:21, we are told that those who practice “drunkenness” will not inherit the kingdom of God. The word “drunkenness” here comes from the Greek word “methusko,” meaning, “to begin to be softened...to grow drunk, or become intoxicated.” Not only is the state of complete drunkenness condemned here, but the process of growing intoxicated is expressly forbidden. Christians have no business engaging in the drinking process, whether that involve one beer or multiple beers; one sip of wine or four glasses of wine. This point is even more powerful when you connect it to the nature of New Testament wine. The people of the first century diluted their wine with water, their goal being to avoid intoxication. There was a HUGE difference between their common wine and their straight, fermented wine. Strong drinks were condemned. This tells us that in Galatians 5:21, Paul is actually condemning the consumption of alcoholic beverages (for social or recreational purposes) as they result in intoxication!

Finally, in 1 Peter 4:3, we find three forms of drinking discussed. Peter says, “For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, *excess of wine, revellings, banquetings*, and abominable idolatries.” The phrase “excess of wine” comes from the Greek word “oinophlugia which means “drunkenness.” We understand the meaning of this term. The word “revellings” comes from the Greek word “komos” meaning, “drinking parties.” While the term “komos” may be vague, consider the word “banquetings” which means, “a drinking; *no reference to the amount consumed.*” Myers Commentary says of this word, “Chiefly applied to social drinking at banquets.” To drink alcohol socially, whether in small or vast amounts, is to sin against God, as the verse here says.

Three New Testament passages have been considered, and it has been shown that all participation in alcohol ought to be avoided. Not only is complete drunkenness condemned, but we also showed the wickedness of the entire drinking process. To be impaired, which can occur with small amounts of alcohol, is to sin against the Almighty God.

In addition to the above verses which condemn intoxication and social drinking, many principles should also be considered and applied. Christians are instructed to be sober-minded in verses such as 1 Thessalonians 5:6 and 1 Peter 1:13. This involves being watchful and circumspect (careful). Consider also the powerful words of 1 Peter 1:16, “Be ye holy; for I am holy.” If Christians are to be holy (consecrated and dedicated), then won’t we set the highest possible standards for ourselves? As seen in Romans 13:14, we are to “Put...on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.” If intoxication is condemned, why would we want to set alcohol before us? Wouldn’t we abstain completely from all forms of drinking? What about the positive influence that we are to have on others? All of these principles prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Christians MUST reject alcohol.

Every argument used to justify drinking falls short. The Bible does not contradict itself, and we have shown from the scriptures that intoxication and social drinking are sinful. Let us heed the words of Solomon in Proverbs 20:1, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.” Let us reject alcohol and strive to be upstanding, moral citizens in the spiritual kingdom of Christ.