

Alcohol And The Believer

Two articles that deal with the facts of modern social drinking of alcoholic beverages compared to those of the New Testament times and how those facts relate to the Christian's understanding and obedience to the teaching of the Bible concerning personal conduct and testimony

Robert H. Stein is associate professor of New Testament at Bethel College, St. Paul, Minnesota. He has the B.D. from Fuller Seminary, S.T.M. from Andover Newton Theological School, and Ph.D. from Princeton Seminary.

As evangelicals we maintain that the Bible is for us the only infallible rule of faith and practice. It is our final authority in all matters of doctrine (faith) and ethics (practice). Yet the Bible was not written to evangelicals living in the twentieth century. The science—or better, the art—of interpreting the biblical text so that the revelation of God written centuries ago is meaningful and correctly understood today is called “hermeneutics.” The basic principle of hermeneutics, to be somewhat simplistic, is that the question “What does it mean for us today?” must be preceded by the question “What did it mean for them yesterday?” If we do not seek first to understand what the text meant when it was written, it will be very difficult to interpret intelligently what it means and demands of us today.

My subject here is the use of the term “wine” in the New Testament. Some readers may already be thinking, “Is he going to try to tell us that wine in the Bible means grape juice? Is he going to try to say that the wine mentioned in the New Testament is any different from the wine bottled today by Christian Brothers or Château Lafite-Rothschild or Mogen David?” Well, my answers are no and yes. No, the wine of the Bible was not unfermented grape juice. Yes, it was different from the wine of today.

In ancient times wine was usually stored in large pointed jugs called *amphorae*. When wine was to be used it was poured from the *amphorae* into large bowls called

kraters, where it was mixed with water. Last year I had the privilege of visiting the great archaeological museum in Athens, Greece, where I saw dozens of these large *kraters*. At the time it did not dawn on me what their use signified about the drinking of wine in biblical times. From these *kraters*, cups or *kylix* were then filled. What is important for us to note is that before wine was drunk it was mixed with water. The *kylix* were filled not from the *amphorae* but from the *kraters*.

The ratio of water to wine varied. Homer (*Odyssey* IX, 208f.) mentions a ratio of 20 to 1, twenty parts water to one part wine. Pliny (*Natural History* XIV, vi, 54) mentions a ratio of eight parts water to one part wine. In one ancient work, Athenaeus's *The Learned Banquet*, written around A.D. 200, we find in Book Ten a collection of statements from earlier writers about drinking practices. A quotation from a play by Aristophanes reads: "Here, drink this also, mingled three and two.' DEMUS. 'Zeus! But it's sweet and bears the three parts well!'" The poet Euenos, who lived in the fifth century B.C., is also quoted:

The best measure of wine is neither much nor very little;

For 'tis the cause of either grief or madness.

It pleases the wine to be the fourth, mixed with three nymphs.

Here the ratio of water to wine is 3 to 1. Others mentioned are:

3 to 1—Hesiod

4 to 1—Alexis

2 to 1—Diodes

3 to 1—Ion

5 to 2—Nichocharēs

2 to 1—Anacreon

Sometimes the ratio goes down to 1 to 1 (and even lower), but it should be noted that such a mixture is referred to as "strong wine." Drinking wine unmixed, on

the other hand, was looked upon as a “Scythian” or barbarian custom. Athenaeus in this work quotes Mnesitheus of Athens:

“The gods has revealed wine to mortals, to be the greatest blessing for those who use it aright, but for those who use it without measure, the reverse. For it gives food to them that take it and strength in mind and body. In medicine it is most beneficial; it can be mixed with liquid and drugs and it brings aid to the wounded. In daily intercourse, to those who mix and drink it moderately, it gives good cheer; but if you overstep the bounds, it brings violence. Mix it half and half, and you get madness; unmixed, bodily collapse.”

It is evident that wine was seen in ancient times as a medicine (and as a solvent for medicines) and of course as a beverage. Yet as a beverage it was always thought of as a mixed drink. Plutarch (*Symposiacs* III, ix), for instance, states. “We call a mixture ‘wine,’ although the larger of the component parts is water.” The ratio of water might vary, but only barbarians drank it unmixed, and a mixture of wine and water of equal parts was seen as “strong drink” and frowned upon. The term “wine” or *oinos* in the ancient world, then, did not mean wine as we understand it today but wine mixed with water. Usually a writer simply referred to the mixture of water and wine as “wine.” To indicate that the beverage was not a mixture of water and wine he would say “unmixed (*akratesteron*) wine.”

One might wonder whether the custom of mixing wine with water was limited to the ancient Greeks. The burden of proof would be upon anyone who argued that the pattern of drinking wine in Jewish society was substantially different from that of the examples already ‘given. And we do have examples in both Jewish and Christian literature and perhaps in the Bible that wine was likewise understood as being a mixture of wine and water.

In several instances in the Old Testament a distinction is made between “wine” and “strong drink.” In Leviticus 10:8, 9, we read, “And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying, ‘Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting. . . .’” Concerning the Nazarite vow Numbers 6:3 states that the Nazarite “shall separate himself from wine and strong drink.” This distinction is found also in Deuteronomy 14:26; 29:6; Judges 13:4, 7, 14; First Samuel 1:15; Proverbs 20:1; 31:4,6; Isaiah 5:11, 22; 28:7; 29:9; 56:12; and Micah 2:11.

The 1901 *Jewish Encyclopedia* (Vol. 12, p. 533) states that in the rabbinic period at least “‘yayin’ [or wine] ‘is to be distinguished from ‘shekar’ [or strong drink]: the former is diluted with water (mazug’); the latter is undiluted (‘yayin hal’).” In the Talmud, which contains the oral traditions of Judaism from about 200 B.C. to A.D. 200, there are several tractates in which the mixture of water and wine is discussed. One tractate (Shabbath 77a) states that wine that does not carry three parts of water well is not wine. The normal mixture is said to consist of two parts water to one part wine. In a most important reference (Pesahim 108b) it is stated that the four cups every Jew was to drink during the Passover ritual were to be mixed in a ratio of three parts water to one part wine. From this we can conclude with a fair degree of certainty that the fruit of the vine used at the institution of the Lord’s Supper was a mixture of three parts water to one part wine. In another Jewish reference from around 60 B.C. we read, “It is harmful to drink wine alone, or again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one’s enjoyment” (II Maccabees 15:39).

In ancient times there were not many beverages that were safe to drink. The danger of drinking water alone raises another point. There were several ways in

which the ancients could make water safe to drink. One method was boiling, but this was tedious and costly. Different methods of filtration were tried. The safest and easiest method of making the water safe to drink, however, was to mix it with wine. The drinking of wine (i.e., a mixture of water and wine) served therefore as a safety measure, since often the water available was not safe. (I remember drinking some water in Salonica, Greece, that would have been much better for me had it been mixed with wine or some other purifying agent.)

When we come to the New Testament the content of the wine is never discussed. The burden of proof, however, is surely upon anyone who would say that the “wine” of the New Testament is substantially different from the wine mentioned by the Greeks, the Jews during the intertestamental period, and the early church fathers. In the writings of the early church fathers it is clear that “wine” means wine mixed with water. Justin Martyr around A.D. 150 described the Lord’s Supper in this way: “Bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president sends up prayers and thanksgiving” (*Apology* 1, 67, 5). Some sixty-five years later Hippolytus instructed the bishops that they shall “eucharistize [bless] first the bread into the representation of the Flesh of Christ; and the cup mixed with wine for the antitype of the Blood which was shed for all who have believed in Him” (*Apostolic Tradition* XXIII, 1). Cyprian around A.D. 250 stated in his refutation of certain heretical practices:

“Nothing must be done by us but what the Lord first did on our behalf, as that the cup which is offered in remembrance of Him should be offered mingled with wine. . . . Thus, therefore, in considering the cup of the Lord, water alone cannot be offered, even as wine alone cannot be offered. For if anyone offer wine only, the blood of Christ is dissociated from us: but if the water be alone, the people are dissociated from Christ. . . . Thus the

cup of the Lord is not indeed water alone, nor wine alone, unless each be mingled with the other” [*Epistle* LXII, 2, 11 and 13].

Unmixed wine and plain water at the Lord’s Supper were both found unacceptable. A mixture of wine and water was the norm. Earlier in the latter part of the second century Clement of Alexandria stated:

“It is best for the wine to be mixed with as much water as possible. . . . For both are works of God, and the mixing of the two, both of water and wine produces health, because life is composed of a necessary element and a useful element. To the necessary element, the water, which is in the greatest quantity, there is to be mixed in some of the useful element” [*Instructor* II, ii, 23.3—24.1].

To consume the amount of alcohol that is in two martinis by drinking wine containing three parts water to one part wine, one would have to drink over twenty-two glasses. In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts of water, but one’s drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind.

In concluding this brief article I would like to emphasize two points. First, it is important to try to understand the biblical text in the context in which it was written. Before we ask “What does the biblical text mean for us today?” we must ask “What did it mean to them originally?” Second, there is a striking difference between the drinking of alcoholic beverages today and the drinking of wine in New Testament times. If the drinking of unmixed wine or even wine mixed in a ratio of one to one with water was frowned upon in ancient times, certainly the drinking of distilled spirits in which the alcoholic content is frequently three to ten times greater would be frowned upon a great deal more.

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 what 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. Their 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.