

Can We Drink Socially? #1

If you are trying to decide which problem society has the most trouble facing, chances are social drinking will not cross your mind. But, we must deal with social drinking because it is problematic to our society. For people who realize that they must face God in the judgment for their actions (2 Corinthians 5:10), the question must be, "What does the Bible say?"

This article is not intended to discuss drunkenness. The Bible gives incontrovertible evidence that drunkenness is sinful (Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:18; Luke 21:34; Romans 13:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:7-8). It is hard to find anyone who will argue the fact that drunkenness is right. However, it is more difficult to convince someone that social drinking is sinful. This is primarily because millions of people see social drinking as acceptable, as long as it is not combined with blatant negligence (i.e. driving an automobile while drinking).

By "social drinking," I do not mean that someone who is a social drinker is going to habitually get drunk. I have seen several articles that claim if someone takes one drink, they will end up being a rapist, murderer, have a broken home, etc. That is not a fair assumption. There are those who occasionally drink a beer, glass of wine, whiskey, vodka, etc., after work, with dinner, or during a special occasion without getting anywhere near even the legal definition of "drunk." Even though this does not appear to contradict biblical teaching, we will see that the Bible gives us sufficient principles to determine that this is indeed wrong.

It still amazes me to see Christians who do not believe that there is anything wrong with taking a drink or two occasionally. Many people say, "Well, didn't Jesus make wine and didn't He drink at social functions?" This is a bastion of defense for alcoholic beverages by drinkers, whether Christian or not. Even after seeing all the problems alcohol can cause, the "social drinker" will quip, "the Bible condemns drunkenness, but it does not condemn social drinking." Sadly, if one searches several Bible dictionaries and commentaries, they will find religious scholars on the side of being against drunkenness, but for drinking. But the question with which we must concern ourselves is, "What does the Bible say?"

The Definition Of Wine In The Bible

The universally accepted definition of "wine" as "fermented grape juice" may well explain why many Bible believing Christians have come to believe that the "wine" mentioned in the Bible must in all instances be alcoholic. This

assumption, known as the "one wine theory," has greatly prejudiced the study of the Biblical teachings on the use of alcoholic beverages by leading many sincere Christians to believe that God approves the moderate use of fermented, intoxicating wine. "The problem," as Robert Teachout points out, "is that people have taken the very usual meaning of the word (whether in Hebrew, Greek, Latin or English) -- as an intoxicating beverage -- and have made it the only definition of the word." This comment is typical of many because they regard wine as being just what our present day dictionaries say: "The fermented juice of the grapes, used as an alcoholic beverage, and in cooking, religious ceremonies, etc."

The Hebrew word *yayin* and the Greek word *oinos* are the two most frequent words used to denote "wine." According to Robert Teachout's tabulation of the 141 references to *yayin* in the Old Testament, 71 times the word refers to unfermented grape juice and 70 times to fermented wine. This is sufficient to establish that *yayin* is sometimes used in the Old Testament to refer to strong drink (Genesis 9:20-21; 19:32-33; 1 Samuel 25:36-37) and sometimes it refers to the unfermented juice of the grape (Isaiah 16:10; Jeremiah 40:10-12; Nehemiah 13:15; Lamentations 2:12). The juice of grapes, also known as must, was generally declared to be a gift from God or a blessing (Proverbs 3:10). On the other hand, wine is declared to be a curse (Proverbs 4:17; 20:1). The Bible does not leave us in the dark about making the distinction as when to drink wine or non-alcoholic must, or grape juice, and when not to drink wine or fermented liquor (Proverbs 23:31-32). The statement in Proverbs clearly teaches us not to look on or use wine after it has gone through the process of fermentation by which alcohol is produced. Therefore, in light of the fact that the word of God distinguishes between good wine (non-alcoholic) and bad wine (alcoholic) and condemns the latter, it must be denied that God condones the drinking of alcoholic wine or any other hard liquor even in moderation.

The Greek word *oinos* is used in the Septuagint to translate the generic Hebrew word *yayin*, which means the juice of grapes at various stages. But *oinos* is also used to translate the Hebrew *tirosh*, which definitely means fresh juice of the grapes, must, or new wine. In fact, *oinos*, which is used for "wine" 28 out of 29 times in the New Testament, is defined as "must, grape juice, or new wine."

The definitions of "wine" from older English dictionaries suggests that when the King James Version of the Bible was produced (1604-1611), its translators must have understood "wine" to refer to both fermented and unfermented wine. In view of this fact, the King James Version's uniform translation of the Hebrew *yayin* and Greek *oinos* as "wine" was an acceptable

translation at that time, since in those days the term could mean either fermented or unfermented wine, just as the words it translates (*yayin* or *oinos*) can mean either. Today, however, when "wine" has assumed the sole meaning of fermented grape juice, modern translations of the Bible should indicate whether the text is dealing with fermented or unfermented grape juice. By failing to provide this clarification, uninformed Bible readers are misled into believing that all references to "wine" in the Bible refer to fermented grape juice.

In the New Testament times, wine mixed with water was the primary table beverage in the Roman Empire. The main ratio for mixing wine and water was three parts water to one part wine. This greatly reduced any intoxicating effect; however, it was still possible to become drunk. Usually, diluted wine would have had a significant effect on the bladder far before the brain. One of the reasons wine was used so prevalently in Roman times was that water was very dangerous to drink without purifying it with wine used as a cleansing agent.

The Preservation Of Grape Juice

Contrary to popular opinion, the problems the ancients encountered in preserving fermented wine were as great as, if not greater than, those faced in preserving unfermented grape juice. To prevent fermented wine from spoiling, vintners used a host of preservatives such as salt, seawater, pitch, boiled-down must, marble dust, lime, sulfur fumes, and crushed iris. In comparison to preserving fermented wine, preserving grape juice unfermented was a simpler process. The ancients had three main methods of preserving the juice of the grape:

- Boiling: This reduced the juice to concentrate, which was then diluted with water.
- Filtration: This method used thick wool to filter out the particles which included the yeast, therefore stopping the fermentation process.
- Cold preservation: This method involved sealing the juice in jars and submerging it in cold water. This would keep the temperature of the must below 45 degrees and prevent fermentation. After the solid particles had settled, it would not ferment even if taken from the cold water.

It is also noteworthy that the ancients did not have sugar as we do and they were far more interested in having a sweet drink than we are because we have so many. However, the process of fermentation destroys the sugar in the juices of the grape by turning it into alcohol. This naturally would have

been undesirable to them. The ancients looked for the quality of sweetness in their drinks rather than alcoholic exhilaration.

In the next article, we will examine the account of Jesus turning water into wine in John 2 and the discussion of social drinking in New Testament passages.

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