

# Is Social Drinking Wrong?

**Introduction.** If you are trying to decide which problem society has the most trouble facing, chances are social drinking will not cross your mind. Nevertheless, 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 real question must be, "What does the Bible say?"

This sermon 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 the Bible condones drunkenness. However, it is more difficult to convince someone that social drinking is a sin against God. 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).

According to an article on MADD's website, teenagers show that social acceptance is a top motivation for underage drinkers. Justin proclaimed, "I'm more open to drinking now than smoking because I'm less likely to get caught drinking." Debbie stated, "It's not like I was pressured into drinking, but that's kind of what you do when you hang out with your friends. It's just the social norm." Mark said, "I drink to be more social. It makes me more outgoing. Alcohol basically enhances anything you do." Of the over 159 million alcohol-impaired driving trips reported in 2002, over 44 percent, or 71 million trips, were made by moderate drinkers.

By using the term "social drinking," I do not mean that someone who is a social drinker will get drunk every weekend. 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 or accurate assumption. There are those who occasionally drink a beer, glass of wine, whiskey, vodka, etc., after work or with dinner without the intent of getting anywhere near 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 course of action 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. 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 in moderation. However, the question with which we must concern ourselves is, "What does the Bible say?"

## I. **The Definition Of "Wine" In The Bible**

- A. 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.
  1. This assumption, known as the "one wine theory," has greatly prejudiced the biblical study of the use of alcoholic beverages by leading many Christians to believe that God approves the moderate use of fermented, intoxicating wine.
  2. "The problem," as Robert Teachout says, "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."
- B. This comment is typical of many people in general 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."
- C. The Hebrew word *yayin* and the Greek word *oinos* are the two most frequent words used to denote "wine."
  1. *Yayin*, which is used for "wine" 141 out of 194 times in the Old Testament, refers 71 times to unfermented grape juice (Isaiah 16:10; Jeremiah 40:10-12; Nehemiah 13:15; Lamentations 2:12) and 70 times to fermented wine (Genesis 9:20-21; 19:32-33; 1 Samuel 25:36-37).
    - a) 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).
    - b) 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.
    - c) 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. *Oinos* is also used to translate the Hebrew *tirosh*, which definitely means the fresh juice of grapes or new wine.
  2. *Oinos*, which is used for "wine" 32 out of 37 times in the New Testament, refers 21 times to unfermented grape juice (Matthew 9:17;

Luke 1:15; Romans 14:21) and 11 times to fermented wine (Mark 15:23; Ephesians 5:18; Revelation 17:2).

D. 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.

1. 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.
2. 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.

E. In the New Testament times, wine mixed with water was the primary table beverage.

1. 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.
2. One of the reasons wine was used so prevalently in ancient times was that not many beverages were safe to drink. Water was very dangerous to drink without adding wine as a purifying agent. The safest and easiest way to make water safe to drink was to mix it with wine or grape juice.
3. Consider the following quotes which show how water was mixed with wine:
  - a) Isaiah 1:22 says, "Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water." This is not referring to how wine was drunk, but how it might be cheapened and sold by a dishonest merchant. Like his counterpart with the crooked scale or crooked weights, a wine merchant could cheat his customers by watering down his wine.
  - b) "For as it is hurtful to drink wine or water alone; and as wine mingled with water is pleasant, and delighteth the taste: even so speech finely framed delighteth the ears of them that read the story. And here shall be an end" (2 Maccabees 15:39).
  - c) "At Athenian banquets, guests concentrated on the food; the sparkling conversations were a feature of the symposium, or

drinking session that followed. here the most important man was the symposiarch, chosen by lot or throw of the dice, who took charge of everything. He decided how much water would be mixed with the wine, called in the entertainers -- dancing girls, acrobats and magicians -- and set the guests to entertaining each other" ("Classical Greece," Great Ages of Man series, Time/Life books, p. 90).

- d) "The dinner party was the main event of Roman social life, and it adhered closely to a traditional form ... When the Roman planned a small party, he composed his guest list so as to have between three and nine people dining, including members of his own family ... A luxurious party began in the early afternoon and ran well into the evening ... Romans ate three-course meals. First came the gustus, an appetizer course that might include salads, shellfish, eggs and honey wine. Then the cena, or dinner proper, was served ... Then came a 'second table' of desserts, with cakes, fruits, nuts, and wine mixed with water" ("Imperial Rome," Great Ages of Man series, Time/Life books, pp. 85-86).

## II. ***The Preservation Of Grape Juice***

- A. Contrary to popular opinion, the problems the ancients encountered in preserving fermented wine were as great as, if not actually greater than, those faced in preserving unfermented grape juice. To prevent fermented wine from becoming acidic, moldy or foul-smelling, vintners used a host of preservatives such as salt, seawater, liquid or solid pitch, boiled-down must, marble dust, lime, sulfur fumes and crushed iris.
- B. In comparison to preserving fermented wine, preserving grape juice unfermented was a relatively simpler process. The ancients had three main methods of preserving the must or juice of the grape:
1. Boiling -- this reduced the juice to concentrate or syrup, which was then diluted with water.
  2. Filtration -- this method used thick wool to filter out the particles which included the yeast, therefore stopping the fermentation process.
  3. Cold preservation -- this method involved sealing the juice in jars and submerging it in cold water.
    - a) This would keep the temperature of the must below 45 degrees and prevent fermentation.
    - b) After the solid particles had settled out of the must it would not ferment even if taken from the cold water.
- C. 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.

### III. ***Jesus And The Wedding Feast At Cana***

- A. The last statement in the previous point clears up much of the confusion surrounding Jesus changing the water into wine in John 2. The belief that the wine Christ provided in Cana was alcoholic rests on five major assumptions.
  - 1. It is assumed that the word *oinos* indicates only "fermented-quality grape drink."
  - 2. It is assumed that since the word *oinos* is used in reference both to the wine which ran out and the wine that Christ made, both wines must have been alcoholic.
  - 3. It is assumed that the Jews did not know how to prevent the fermentation of grape juice. Since the season of the wedding was just before Passover (John 2:13), that is, six months after the grape harvest, the wine used at Cana had ample time to ferment.
  - 4. It is assumed that the description given by the master of the banquet to the wine provided by Christ as "the good wine" means a high-quality alcoholic wine.
  - 5. It is assumed that the expression "well drunk" (John 2:10), used by the master of the banquet, indicates that the guests were intoxicated because they had been drinking fermented wine. Consequently, the wine Jesus made must also have been fermented.
- B. It was common custom to bring out the freshest wine at the beginning of the feast. As the wine ran low, the older wine was brought out.
  - 1. In John 2:10, the master of the feast made the comment that Jesus had saved the good wine until now (near the end of the festivities).
  - 2. This "good wine" was the fresh, sweet must or unfermented wine. New wine is not intoxicating. It is not intoxicating until some time after the process of fermentation has set in, since fermentation is a process of decay.
- C. It is against the principle of scriptural and moral analogy to suppose that Christ, the Creator of good things, would exert His supernatural power to create an intoxicating wine which scripture condemns as a "mocker" and a "brawler" (Proverbs 20:1) and which the Holy Spirit has chosen as the symbol of divine wrath (Revelation 14:8, 10; 16:19; 18:3).
- D. Scriptural and moral consistency require that "the good wine" produced by Christ was fresh, unfermented grape juice. In fact, the adjec-

tive used to describe the wine made by Christ is not the common word *agathos*, which simply means "good," but is *kalos*, which means "that which is morally excellent or befitting."

#### IV. **Social Drinking In The New Testament**

- A. People who seek to justify social drinking because the Bible does not specifically condemn it are just plain mistaken.
1. The word for "banquetings" in 1 Peter 4:3 is the Greek word *potos* which means "a drinking bout; a carousal." Trench tells us that this word is "not of necessity excessive, but giving opportunity for excess" (p. 225).
    - a) This was the ancient practice of social drinking without any reference to quantity (cf. Matthew 10:41-42).
    - b) Peter condemns "excess of wine," "revellings" and "banquetings." He made a specific reference to three levels of drinking and condemned all of them!
  2. The irony of the mockers' charge that on the day of Pentecost the apostles were drunk on *gleukos*, or the grape juice which apparently was their common beverage (Acts 2:13), provides an indirect proof of their abstinence from fermented grape juice.
    - a) There would have been no point in the mockers' attributing the cause of the disciples' strange actions to unfermented grape juice if it was not common knowledge that the apostles abstained from intoxicating wine.
    - b) The intended jibe was that the disciples were such dimwits they got drunk on grape juice, not intoxicating wine!
  3. There are several Greek words that are translated by our word "sober." Most of these words carry the idea of being sound in mind, well-balanced and self-controlled.
    - a) However, *nepho* originally referred to the abstinence of intoxicants as shown by the following Greek authorities.
      - (1) Rienecker -- "To be sober, not to be under the influence of drink."
      - (2) Strong -- "To abstain from wine (keep sober)."
      - (3) Kittel -- "The opposite of intoxication."
      - (4) Vine -- "Signifies to be free from the influences of intoxicants."
    - b) There are four New Testament verses in which *nepho* is translated as "sober" (1 Thessalonians 5:6, 8; 1 Peter 1:13; 5:8).
      - (1) It has been medically proven that alcohol affects the mind after the first drink. Thus, abstinence from intoxicating drink is demanded in order to fulfill the command to be "sober."

(2) *Nepho* is also translated as "watch" in two places (2 Timothy 4:5; 1 Peter 4:7). *Nepho* is used mainly in a figurative way in the New Testament; however, we must blend the literal and the figurative because the figurative cannot make sense without the literal definition.

(a) For instance, one is not watchful if their mind is not clear. One cannot be "sober" in judgment unless one knows the literal meaning of the word "sober."

(b) Another example would be in 2 Corinthians 11:2-3, where one is to be a "chaste virgin." In order to fulfill this command, one must recognize the literal meaning of "chaste virgin."

4. Some would claim that Paul told Timothy to drink intoxicants in 1 Timothy 5:23, thereby making it acceptable for us to moderately do so. Yet, we understand by apostolic example that we too must refrain from drinking intoxicants (1 Corinthians 11:1). Why would Paul give these instructions to Timothy? There are two possibilities which should be examined.

a) Paul told Timothy to drink the pure juice of the grape for his health or he told him to drink intoxicants for some type of ailment. In either case it was a health issue.

b) Intoxicants are used today in medicines just as they were during the first century (Luke 10:34; Proverbs 31:6-7; cf. Matthew 27:48; Mark 15:23).

c) Paul's prescription for Timothy's ailments is not a general rule of "moderate use" for all occasions. General biblical rules still apply (Habakkuk 2:5, 15).

B. Furthermore, in the New Testament, purity has always been a major aspect of a Christian's life (Matthew 5:8; 1 Timothy 4:12; 5:22; 2 Timothy 2:22; Romans 12:1; Ephesians 1:4). Do you really believe that having a loose attitude concerning social drinking would meet God's requirements for purity and holiness?

C. Finally, two statements in Jesus' sermon on the mount are worthy of consideration.

1. In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus not only condemned murder but He went beyond the overt crime of killing and stated that anyone who has a malicious and wicked attitude is a murderer.

2. In Matthew 5:27-28, Jesus not only condemned adultery but He went to the heart of the problem and stated that someone commits adultery even if they look upon a woman and lust.

3. Considering the way Jesus taught on these two subjects, how do you think He would feel about social drinking?

**Conclusion.** Although Paul was writing about humility in Philippians 2:5, the principle can apply to all phases of being a Christian. We should be diligent to have the same attitude Jesus did toward everything, whether it be sin, salvation, the nature of God, etc. A very appropriate question is, "Could you see Jesus engaging in social or occasional drinking?" If we are going to have the attitude of Christ, then we have to ask ourselves this question!