

Should Christians Drink Alcohol?

David Huffstutler, Ph. D.

May 29, 2018

As a Christian, husband, father, and pastor, there are some questions concerning Christian living that I feel I am forced to answer. If I avoid giving an answer to a question that is clearly controversial and divisive among Christians, my silence can become my tacit approval for every position on a given matter. So, from time to time, I must answer questions for the sake of myself and others, such as, “Should Christians drink alcohol?”

This paper is not necessarily meant to convince others of my position but to publicly and charitably state my own convictions concerning alcohol and how I am thus compelled to lead my church. By *drinking alcohol*, I mean to address whether or not Christians should consume a drink with alcoholic content as a beverage, whether in a social or individual setting.

As others have stated, “In the last two hundred years in America virtually every branch of the Church has been drawn into the debate over alcohol,”¹ and, “To say that the question about drinking has become highly controversial is an understatement for sure.”² Moreover, a statement made 25 years ago remains true today: “According to general public perception, today it is the feeble person, or the anti-social, miserable person, or the peculiar person who fails to make effective use of the psycho-active and mood-affecting properties of alcohol.”³

I do not mean for this paper to create more controversy than there already has been. I simply hope to make it clear what I believe and how I lead my church for the sake of reducing unnecessary division or confusion by not speaking to the matter at all. Moreover, I am not an expert on the matter, and this paper rests upon a mere reading of representative books and what little contact I have had with the matter in my own life. Perhaps discussion of some passages and arguments relevant to one position or another are missing. Nonetheless, I am confident that my study is sufficient for this paper and my position, and, as with any matter, that Scripture is sufficient to help answer the question of whether or not to drink alcohol today (cf. Ps 119:1; 2 Tim 3:16–17).⁴

A Snapshot Summary of Three Positions

There are three primary positions in the alcohol debate. A *prohibitionist* position would be that Christians must never drink anything that has alcoholic content because the Bible expressly prohibits such a practice. An *abstentionist* position would be that Christians should abstain from drinking today’s alcoholic beverages because they are either unnecessary or immediately intoxicating, things untrue of what God’s people drank in Old or New Testament times. A *moderationist* position would be that Christians may drink alcoholic beverages as long as they moderate their consumption so as not to lead to drunkenness. I believe the *abstentionist* position is best supported by Scripture, as I attempt to show below.

¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *God Gave Wine: What the Bible Says About Alcohol* (Fountain Inn, SC: Victorious Hope, 2015), 1

² Randy Jaeggli, *Christians and Alcohol: A Scriptural Case for Abstinence* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2014), 5

³ Peter Masters, *Should Christians Drink? The Case for Total Abstinence* (London: Wakemen Trust, 1992), 29.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), p. 127, states, “The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.”

Words, Usage, and Historical Context

The most common Hebrew word translated “wine” in the OT is *yayin*, used 141 times. Other OT words involving beverages that can have alcoholic content are *tyrwš* (37 or 38 times), *šēkār* (22 or 23 times), and *āsīs* (5 times). The most common NT word translated “wine” is *oinos* (33 or 34 times), and *gleukos* is used once in Acts 2:13.⁵

Of the more common OT and NT words (*yayin* and *oinos*), context indicates that their consumption could be something either positive or negative. Positively, Psalm 104:14–15 states of God, “You cause... wine to gladden the heart of man,” and John 2:9 records that “the master of the feast tasted the water now become wine,” a miracle by Jesus (cf. John 2:1–11).⁶ Negatively, Proverbs 20:1 states, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” Likewise, Ephesians 5:18, commands, “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery.”⁷

From this usage, a prohibitionist would conclude that every positive use of *yayin* in the OT and *oinos* in the NT must refer to unfermented grape juice and that every negative use of these words in Scripture must refer to wine, that is, grape juice that has undergone fermentation and is thus alcoholic and intoxicating.⁸ Ancient practices could encourage or discourage fermentation and thus the alcoholic content of the wine, so it would have been possible for God’s people to have halted the fermentation process before it had begun.⁹

A moderationist would more or less see a uniformity from one usage to the next, encourage the good use of wine, and discourage its abuse.¹⁰

An abstentionist would respond that it is not altogether clear that a negative or positive context demands the presence or absence of alcoholic content in what has been pressed out of the fruit of the vine. If anything, historical data shows that the fermentation process began in the press itself and continued while the juice was collected and stored, making any ancient grape juice alcoholic to some degree (and thus *wine*).¹¹ While the resultant liquid could be 2–6% alcohol, it could become up to 14% alcohol.¹² But even then, ancient Jews and Greeks saw those who drank straight, undiluted wine as barbarians.¹³ Both Jews and Greeks typically diluted their wine for the sake of purifying the water or simply avoiding the possibility of drunkenness.¹⁴ Whatever the ratio of water to wine may have been,¹⁵ dilution was “the virtually universal

⁵ See Jaeggli, 143–54, for an exhaustive listing of each of these words. For an in-depth examination of these words, see Robert P. Teachout, *Wine: The Biblical Imperative: Total Abstinence* (N.p.: 1983), 17–22; Gentry, 33–81; Jaeggli, 37–90.

⁶ See also Deut 14:26; Ecc 9:7; 10:19; Isa 55:1; Zech 9:15; 10:17.

⁷ For other negative references, see below.

⁸ Teachout is adamant: “There is no middle ground!” (Teachout, 61).

⁹ Teachout, 47–50. This either/or approach forces novel or unlikely interpretations for some passages. For example, Teachout, 68–71, would claim that since an overseer or deacon would never drink wine at all, one must claim that “an overseer must be...not a drunkard” really means not associating with drunkards and that “not addicted to much wine” is actually not excessively enjoying the God-given gift of grape juice in 1 Tim 3:8.

¹⁰ E.g., Gentry, 33–81.

¹¹ Jaeggli, 11–13.

¹² Jaeggli, 37–38; Masters, 19.

¹³ Masters, 23. Wine in biblical times was always diluted, anywhere from a 2:1 to 20:1 ratio.

¹⁴ Jaeggli, 13–20. “The practice of diluting wine with water in the ancient world is so well attested in the historical sources that it is *undeniable*” (Jaeggli, 13; emphasis original).

¹⁵ Jaeggli, 17–18, elaborates, “The traditional proportions [of water to wine] were 3:1, 5:2, or 5:3; in certain instances, the wine was so strong that it had to be mixed at a ration of 20:1.”

practice” of the day and “undeniable.”¹⁶ After dilution, a cup of wine would have been virtually non-intoxicating. If a divine standard is helpful, considering John 2:1–11, if Jesus made the wine with alcoholic content (and even drank some of it himself—cf. Luke 7:33–35), it could have been less than 3% alcohol¹⁷ and would have been so minimal in its alcoholic content that it was not intoxicating unless drunk in excess, especially after dilution.¹⁸

Whatever position one holds, as can be seen above, every advocate for his position wrangles over these words to some degree. Since the lexicons and Biblical dictionaries do not make a distinction between grape juice and wine, prohibitionists eschew them, moderationists champion them, and abstentionists agree with them as well, only to quickly add what the moderationist might fail to mention, namely, that the alcohol then was diluted and thus not the same as that of today. Either way, everyone barrels into history hoping to find answers for one question or another.

From the above, it seems inescapable that pressing juice out of grapes resulted in fermentation to some degree, that dilution was practiced thereafter, and that the result, whether made by Jesus or anyone else, was something so weakly alcoholic that it really does not find an equivalent with the regular beverages of our modern day.

Distillation would not come about until the 1200’s, eventually allowing for modern-day wines of 15–20% alcohol and spirits that have an even higher percentage of alcohol,¹⁹ something stronger than even the strongest, undiluted wine in biblical times (14%). For any discussion of prohibition, moderation, or abstention to be truly biblical, a beverage that has even more alcoholic content than was possible in biblical times is not even worthy of Christian consideration. Pushing it one step further, since it was considered *barbaric* to drink undiluted wine in those days (which could have been anywhere between 2% and 14% alcohol), it is wise for us to avoid beverages with the same alcoholic content today. If the goal was to dilute wine in order to avoid sickness or drunkenness, we can simply avoid alcoholic beverages today thanks to the many sanitary, non-alcoholic beverages we have today, water included. Alcoholic beverages in American society and elsewhere are unnecessary at the least and intoxicating at worst.²⁰

Important Passages on Alcohol

As one can see from the above, getting into the weeds of words is somewhat necessary, especially as it forces one into the history of the matter to understand fermentation, dilution, and what kind of beverage God’s people were really drinking. With this understanding of the vocabulary and historical context in hand, we can better understand and appreciate a number of passages that speak against the abuse and misuse of wine in a variety of ways.

¹⁶ Jaeggli, 16.

¹⁷ Jaeggli, 84.

¹⁸ Isa 1:22 is often mentioned on the matter of dilution but argues for nothing one way or the other. The statement “your best wine is mixed with water” is condemnatory in context not because dilution itself was wrong, but because dilution in this context was something done before its sale for the sake of spreading it thin for dishonest financial gain (Jaeggli, 24–25; Masters, 99–100; cf. Gentry, 145–46).

¹⁹ Jaeggli, 38; Masters, 21–23, 101–02.

²⁰ Since biblical wine was almost certainly diluted, an abstentionist is conveniently relieved of the prohibitionist demand to everywhere distinguish between the unfermented and fermented, and he also avoids the moderationist misstep of equating ancient alcohol with modern alcohol.

Narratives of Drunkenness

A host of narratives illustrate the disastrous results of drunkenness. A drunken Noah was found naked and inappropriately viewed by his son (Gen 9:20–22). A drunken Lot impregnated his daughters at their design and did not even know it (Gen 19:31–35). A drunken Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire before the Lord and were immediately incinerated (Lev 10:1–11). A drunken Nabal feasted and made his heart merry when he should have feared for his life for having spurned David and his army (1 Sam 25:36–37). A drunken Uriah valiantly resisted the pleasures of marriage after David made him drunk in an attempt to cover up his sin with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:13). A drunken Amnon was left defenseless and murdered at the command of Absalom (2 Sam 13:28–29). A drunken King Ahasuerus asked his wife Vashti to inappropriately display herself before the people, resulting in her refusal and dismissal (Est 1:10–12). A drunken King Elah was left defenseless and murdered by one of his military commanders (1 Kings 16:8–10). A drunken King Ben-hadad foolishly waged and lost a war emboldened by his wine (1 Kings 20:16–21). A drunken Belshazzar used Israel’s golden temple vessels for his thousand lords while praising false gods, bringing about the judgment of God and his assassination that night (Dan 5:1–6, 30). Summarizing these narratives, drunkenness can lead to voyeurism, incest, unacceptable worship, idolatrous worship, vulnerability to danger, putting others in danger, and is forced upon others to cover up sin. In many of the instances above, the drunkard dies by the hand of man or God.

Other Passages on Drunkenness

Given these illustrations, it is no surprise that Scripture gives many warnings, condemnations, and negative descriptions of drunkenness besides. Drunkards mock and brawl, are violent, stubborn, rebellious, and are unwisely led astray by wine (Deut 21:20; Prov 4:17; 20:1). Drunkards experience woe, sorrow, strife, complaining, uncaused wounds, and redness of eyes (Prov 23:29). Drunkards lose their understanding, reel, stagger, and grope as if walking in the darkness, vomiting all over the tables where they drink and sometimes on the ground, staggering in the mess (Job 12:25; Ps 107:27; Isa 19:14; 28:7–8; Hos 4:11). Drunkards love their wine and drinking companions too much, resulting in poverty and rags (Prov 21:17; 23:20–21). Drunkards give the entirety of their day to wine and long after it, seeing strange things and uttering things that are perverse as well (Prov 23:30–32; Isa 5:11; 56:12). Drunkards’ lives are a consequent waste of lying around drunk or getting up, only to seek their wine again (Prov 23:34–35). Given the biblical description of drunkenness, one would only expect modern statistics to do as they do—amply illustrate the damage that drinking does to individuals, families, and society as a whole.²¹

In light of such sin, drunkards are warned by God of judgment to come (Isa 5:22). Sometimes these passages describe how God has let drunkenness become pervasive as a judgment in and of itself (Isa 28:7–8). Drunkards are explicitly told that they will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:21).²²

²¹ For statistics on the negative effects and damage of alcohol, see, e.g., Jaeggli, 3–4, 28, 121; Masters, 17, 33–34; Teachout, 54–56.

²² To examine a debated text for this section, we could add Micah 2:11. A prohibitionist would see the “wind and lies” of a preacher’s promise of “wine and strong drink” to be the wind and lies of allowing the people to drink

The Wisdom of Abstinence and Avoidance

Given wine's potential for disaster, it is no surprise to see that both priests and kings were forbidden to drink wine in serving as they did (Lev 10:9; Prov 31:6–7; Ezek 44:21; cf. Ecc 10:17; Isa 5:22–23). Being given to wine is not fitting for an overseer (1 Tim 3:3; Titus 1:7), a deacon (1 Tim 3:8), or older men or women (Titus 2:3; cf. 2:2). Timothy abstained from wine (cf. 1 Tim 5:23), likely being a model for all pastors and following the example of Paul.²³ For all Christians, drunkenness is explicitly forbidden (Eph 5:18; Rom 13:13) and something to be avoided by taking necessary measures to do so (Rom 13:13–14),²⁴ even by denying company to those who engage in this sin (Prov 23:20–21; 1 Cor 5:11).²⁵

To clarify, I realize that the limitations above on priests and kings were limited to their service and that overseers and deacons were allowed to drink wine but not too much of it. At the same time, when we consider that modern-day beer, wine, and spirits are higher in alcoholic content than the wine of biblical times, there is really no equivalent between biblical wine and the alcoholic beverages of today. I think Solomon would say that modern beer, wine, and spirits are something unmixed, not diluted, and not even something to be desired because they immediately inebriate to some degree and lead to complete drunkenness at worst (Prov 23:30–31).²⁶ Moreover, if all Christians are commanded to make no provision to gratify the desires of the flesh, drunkenness included (Rom 13:13–14), we should simply stay away from alcohol altogether. There is no need for it, other beverages exist if we are looking for something special, and our water is safe to drink.

in and of itself. A more likely interpretation, however, is that the preacher promised blessing with specific examples when he should have been warning the people of judgment to come (cf. Gentry, 56–57).

²³ Masters, 65–70. For Timothy (and others) following Paul's example, see 2 Tim 3:10–11, 14; 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1–2; Phil 3:17; 2 Thess 3:9. First Timothy 5:23 notably falls within injunctions concerning elders, implying that Timothy as a minister of God's Word was taught to abstain: "The most logical answer [as to why 1 Tim 5:23 is connected to 5:17–25 but seems not to be] is that those early elders and ministers schooled under Paul were all abstainers, and it fell to them to set the example in introducing the standard of the New Testament to the people of God" (Masters, 69).

²⁴ Added to Scriptures that specifically mention drunkenness, Masters points out that commands to be sober implied abstinence because a muddled mind at any time is not fitting for a Christian (1 Thess 5:6–8; Titus 2:2; 1 Pet 1:13; 4:7; 5:8; Eph 5:15; Masters, 71–74). Besides sobriety, there are other reasons to avoid alcohol as well. From Eph 5:8, 11, Rom 1:29–31, 12:9, 1 Thess 5:22, 1 Cor 10:6, Masters claims, "If the alcohol industry has become firmly identified with the interests of God's arch-enemy, then we should have no relationship with it on the basis of the commands represented in these verses of Scripture" (Masters, 44; cf. 39–44). He goes on to add Eph 4:27, Jude 23, Rom 13:14, 1 Cor 6:12, 10:23, and Phil 4:8 to his list as well—"These are just some of the passages, typical of many, which have been referred to for years in support of Christians abstaining from alcohol" (Masters, 47).

²⁵ Nazarites (Num 6:3) and even a Nazarite's pregnant mother (e.g., Judg 13:4) were to abstain from wine to emphasize the consecrated role of the Nazarite. Also, while the Rechabites were rebuked for following Jonadab's words on abstaining from wine but not listening to the words of the Lord, they were nonetheless commended for their following Jonadab's words on abstinence (Jer 35:6, 14, 18–19). Concerning the Rechabites, Jaeggli, 64, gives this helpful note of application: "Young adults are sometimes tempted to throw off the constraints of what they have perceived to be an overly restrictive upbringing. But there is no blessing in a failure to heed parental warnings about alcohol consumption." Speaking generally and not specifically of the Rechabites, Masters adds that we should be examples to others in order to show proper living and not lead them into sin (Rom 14:15, 21; 2 Cor 6:3–4; 11:29; Masters, 75–81). "If we appear to approve of today's alcoholic drinks, we will certainly lower the guard of younger people around us, and in so doing we may contribute to someone's future tragic experience" (Masters, 81).

²⁶ Teachout, 53–59, ably gathers scientific data to show that inebriation begins after the first drink, which is 12 ounces of beer, 3.5 ounces of fortified wine, 5.5 ounces of ordinary wine, or 1.5 ounces of whiskey.

Conclusion

A study of the biblical words for wine eventually takes one back in time in order to understand them in their historical context. It seems each position can support its conclusions by digging hard enough to find an ancient word usage or practice that makes its argument all the more viable. If fermentation was unavoidable to some degree, and if dilution was practically universal, it does not seem illegitimate to use the word *wine* for something good or potentially bad. The content of biblical wine could lead to drunkenness if drunk in excess, or it could have had relatively no effect when used normally as a beverage. Either way, biblical wine simply has no modern equivalent if compared to beer, wine, or spirits. Moreover, if we have clean water to drink and are to make no provision for drunkenness, abstaining from modern alcoholic beverages is the best practice for Christians who desire to live as filled by the Spirit.