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AN EXAMINATION OF ALCOHOL FROM THE BIBLE



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STAND, TEACH, DEFEND

**AN EXAMINATION OF
ALCOHOL FROM THE BIBLE**

**V. 57
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The Spiritual Sword

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

HOW YOU CAN USE THE SPIRITUAL SWORD	ii
IS DRINKING MERELY UNWISE, OR IS IT A SIN?	
<i>Mike Hixson, Associate Editor</i>	1
THE NORMALIZATION OF ALCOHOL AMONG CHRISTIANS	
<i>Doug Burleson</i>	4
OLD TESTAMENT WARNINGS AGAINST INTOXICATING DRINK	
<i>Justin Rogers</i>	8
DRINKING PARTIES	
<i>Kerry Duke</i>	12
NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON SOBRIETY AND SELF-CONTROL	
<i>Bill Boyd</i>	16
THE CASE FOR CHRISTIAN ABSTINENCE	
<i>Steve Higginbotham</i>	19
WENDELL WINKLER ARTICLES	22
THE EXAMPLE PRINCIPLE: NOT CAUSING OTHERS TO STUMBLE	
<i>Luke Griffin and David Sproule</i>	23
SPIRITUAL SWORD ONLINE JULY ARTICLES	27
ALCOHOL AND THE CHRISTIAN'S INFLUENCE	
<i>Hugh Fulford</i>	31
DID JESUS TURN WATER INTO ALCOHOLIC WINE?	
<i>Allen Webster</i>	35
PAUL TOLD TIMOTHY TO "USE A LITTLE WINE"	
<i>Phil Sanders</i>	41
TEACHING OUR YOUTH ABOUT THE DANGERS OF ALCOHOL	
<i>Caleb Colley</i>	45
HELPING THE STRUGGLING AND RESTORING THE FALLEN	
<i>Gary Hampton</i>	48
PREACHING ON ALCOHOL WITHOUT COMPROMISE	
<i>Glenn Colley</i>	52
IS ONE DRINK A SIN?	
<i>Allen Webster</i>	56
2026 SPIRITUAL SWORD LECTURESHIP SCHEDULE	59

HOW YOU CAN USE *The Spiritual Sword*

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There can be no doubt that we are living in perilous times. The apostle Paul warned, "This know also that in the last days perilous times shall come" (2 Tim. 3:1). Among other things, he prophesied that "evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). He admonished the righteous to know that "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). He advised Timothy, his "son in the faith," that "the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts they shall heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Paul's inspired solution to these troubling times was simple and direct. He charged Timothy to "preach the word" (2 Tim. 4:2). Jude exhorted his beloved brethren to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Paul himself stated that he was "set for the defense of the gospel" (Phil. 1:17). The deeper the word sinks into our hearts, the better prepared we will be to combat sin and error (Ps. 119:11).

THE SPIRITUAL SWORD is committed to proclaiming the word of truth. Has there ever been a time when this was more needed than now?

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Whatever method you choose, use THE SPIRITUAL SWORD in these difficult days to root and ground each individual in the truth of the gospel.



IS DRINKING MERELY UNWISE, OR IS IT A SIN?

Mike Hixson, Associate Editor

Associate editor of *The Spiritual Sword* and preacher for the Olive Branch congregation in Mississippi.



We live in a society that embraces alcoholic consumption and, in many respects, never gives it a second thought. The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) indicated in 2024 that “228.4 million people

ages 12 and older (79.2 percent in this age group) reported that they drank alcohol at some point in their lifetime.” Those numbers are staggering to contemplate, and they present an index of where we are as a nation in the moral and spiritual realm. The devil and his allies have effectively and strategically gained a foothold in the hearts and lives of the American people when it comes to the acceptance of alcoholic beverages. Alcohol is one of the tools in the devil’s toolbox that he continues to use to destroy lives physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

While the integration of alcohol use by people in the world is a foregone conclusion, it is disheartening that some members of the

Lord’s church have allowed the influence of the world to taint their view of sobriety and will now defend the moderate use of alcohol, or what is often called “social drinking.” The apostle Paul challenged the saints in Rome not to allow the world to pour them into its mold, but to be transformed by the renewing of the mind (Rm. 12:2). When the world allures and captivates our attention as children of God, then our decision making becomes severely compromised in the spiritual realm and is reflected in our behavior and actions. Let us now turn our attention to the question, “Is drinking merely unwise, or is it sinful?”

Drinking Is Unwise

In Ephesians 5:15, Paul counseled, “See then that you walk circumspectly.” The term “circumspectly” means “to live carefully . . . deviating in no respect from the law of duty” (Thayer, 198). Thus, we must exercise care and caution in the Christian life, striving to walk in conformity to the truth. According to Paul, we are not to allow the world to soil and contaminate our behavior as saints

(Eph. 5:3–7). Prior to obeying the gospel, we were in a state of spiritual darkness, but now we, “Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord” (Eph. 5:8–10). As members of the body of Christ, we are to remember who we are and whose we are (1 John 3:1–3).

Paul’s charge to walk carefully is further amplified by the qualifying statement, “not as fools but as wise” (Eph. 5:15). The word “fools” is defined as “a lack of spiritual discernment, practical understanding, and godly skill for living. It is not a mere absence of information; rather, it describes a moral and volitional deficit that ignores the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7)” (Biblehub). By way of contrast, the term “wise” denotes, “one who in action is governed by piety and integrity” (Thayer, 582). The avoidance of foolish behavior in favor of walking in wisdom can save us from a myriad of heartache and trouble.

Proverbs is an inspired book that encourages acquiring wisdom for the blessings it yields in life. Solomon outlined the benefits of wisdom in these words, “Happy is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding; for her proceeds are better than the profits of silver, and her gain than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies, and all the things you may desire cannot compare with her” (Prov. 3:13–15). Because wisdom blesses and enriches our lives, Solomon went on to say, “Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand riches and honor. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peace. She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her, and happy are all who retain her” (Prov. 3:16–18).

Since wisdom is a key to enjoying a good life, why would anyone knowingly engage in a practice that has been proven time and time again to be foolish? The consumption of alcoholic beverages falls into the category of engaging in folly. Solomon penned, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and

whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Prov. 20:1). Alcohol has often been contributory to crude, boisterous speech, lewd and aggressive behavior, bickering, and fighting. It does not take an Einstein to realize that such behavior is not sanctioned by the Lord.

Solomon further chronicled the dangers of alcoholic beverages by asking a series of questions associated with drinking. He asks, “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes?” (Prov. 23:29). Why would people bring something into their lives that only leads to woe, sorrow, contentions, complaints, wounds without cause, and redness of eyes? There is a reason alcohol is called “the devil’s brew.” The consumption of alcohol has destroyed marriages, wrecked homes, ruined careers, alienated friends, and led to homicide, rape, and much more. Add to this the number of lives that have been lost on the highways because foolish people get behind the wheel after consuming alcohol. Also add to the equation the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual destructiveness of alcohol.

*The first drink is not
harmless—it begins
the very process
God commands the
Christian to avoid.*

Drinking Is Sinful

Paul wrote, “Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober . . . but let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation” (1 Thes. 5:6, 8). The term “watch” denotes maintaining a state of “vigilance” or “spiritual alertness” (Vine, 201). The watchful or vigilant mindset is connected to being “sober” or

demonstrating “temperance” (Thayer, 425). Interestingly, W. E. Vine states the term “sober” means, “to be free from the influence of intoxicants” (44). There is no question the usage of alcohol dulls the senses and robs its users of self-control and spiritual alertness. According to the National Safety Council, “Impairment begins with the first drink.” The Cleveland Clinic notes, “Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant (it reduces stimulation in your central nervous system) and affects every organ in your body.” They indicate at a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) of 0.02 percent, a person “may experience an altered mood, relaxation and a slight loss of judgment.” The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania states a BAC of 0.02 percent causes “decreased visual tracking.”

A further examination of Scripture reveals this admonition from the pen of the inspired apostle Paul, “Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). The term “drunk” in this text according to W. E. Vine, “signifies to make drunk, or to grow drunk (an inceptive verb), marking the process of intoxication” (341). It is important to note that an inceptive verb denotes, “the beginning, inception, or becoming of a state, action, or condition. It describes the initial state of a process.” We might illustrate it like this: If before going to bed your spouse asks you to take the roast out of the freezer and put it on the counter to thaw for dinner tomorrow, that marks the beginning of the process of thawing, not the result. The inceptive verb removes the possibility of justifying social drinking because Paul is saying do not even start the process of intoxication. Consequently, there is absolutely no justification for a Christian to partake of alcoholic beverages, no matter the quantity.

A careful sifting of the Scriptures reveals a child of God is to live a life of sobriety, which would be compromised severely by partaking of alcoholic beverages (1 Thes. 5:6, 8). The process that leads to

intoxication, beginning with the first drink, is prohibited. Scripture teaches abstinence. Rather than our bodies being containers for alcohol and our minds poisoned by “the devil’s brew,” we are instructed to fill our minds with the teaching of the Spirit, or the Bible (Eph. 5:18; Col. 3:16). Rather than alcohol controlling our mind and actions, our lives are to be in submission to the teaching of the Lord and his word (Mt. 7:21–27; Lk. 6:46; Rev. 22:14).

The Bible presents an iron-clad case for the dangers and sinfulness of the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Let us review key points related to alcohol and the Christian:

1. The use of alcohol is a violation of the command to exercise sobriety in life (1 Thes. 5:6, 8).
2. Drinking alcohol is a violation of the command to demonstrate self-control over our mental faculties (Gal. 5:23; 2 Pet. 1:6).
3. The consumption of alcohol defiles the body, which is to be offered as a living sacrifice to the Lord (Rm. 12:1).
4. Alcoholic beverages are tools of the devil and are used to attract and allure us through “the lust of the flesh” and “the lust of the eyes” (1 Jn. 2:16).
5. Consuming alcoholic beverages is a sign that the world has captured our allegiance (Rm. 12:2; Jas. 4:4).
6. The use of alcohol and the engagement of social drinking are a failure to heed the warning of Scripture which reads, “nor give place to the devil” (Eph. 4:27).
7. Drinking alcoholic beverages destroys the body and soul, and both belong to the Lord (1 Cor. 6:19–20).
8. The consumer of alcohol cannot live a holy (separated) life as commanded by the Lord (1 Pet. 1:15–16).
9. The use of alcohol undermines our Christian example (1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Cor. 11:1).
10. The consumption of alcohol hinders us from walking in the footsteps of Jesus, who is our great example (1 Pet. 2:21).

11. Drinking alcohol will rob us of our eternal inheritance with the Lord and his people (1 Pet. 1:3–4).

Conclusion

The alcohol industry is a multi-billion dollar a year revenue maker in America with over a trillion dollars in sales globally. Strategic marketing plans and glitzy advertising may mask its carnage and world-wide destruction. However, for those who study the information, the destructiveness it continues to cause is beyond dispute. Add to this a careful investigation of divine truth, and the conclusion of the matter is that alcohol is both unwise and sinful.

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THE NORMALIZATION OF ALCOHOL AMONG CHRISTIANS

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Only nine chapters into the Bible, readers first learn of the dangers of consuming alcohol. Farmer Noah planted a vineyard, and in Genesis 9:21, Moses records that Noah “drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent” (NKJV). Noah’s sin resulted in his being shamed and his grandson, Canaan, the son of Ham, being cursed (Gen. 9:22–27). From that point forward, Scripture consistently warns about the dangers of alcohol abuse. Aaron and his sons were commanded to avoid wine and intoxicating drink when entering the tent of meeting, lest they perish (Lev. 10:9). Later kings and princes were warned against wine or intoxicating drink

“lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted” (Prov. 31:5). Isaiah rebuked Judah’s prophets for allowing wine and intoxicating drink to impact their vision and judgment (Isa. 28:7). Serious business among the Old Testament covenant people, especially the Hebrew patriarchs, priests, princes, and prophets, was to be done soberly. The failures of drunk Lot (Gen. 19:30–38), drunk Nabal (1 Sam. 25:36–38), and drunk Amnon (2 Sam. 13:28–29) warn against taking the prohibitions against wine and intoxicating drink lightly.

The challenges of alcohol abuse have not changed, but many congregations no longer hear messages or read materials sounding the same warnings that echo throughout Scripture. Why? Perhaps some Christians fear being perceived as legalistic. Due to a

“restudying” of key passages or events in Scripture, or perhaps even connections to local government, some church leaders no longer oppose social drinking or even alcohol being sold in convenience stores or served in local restaurants. Perhaps some church leaders believe that alcohol sales will attract more business, revenue, and even better restaurants to local communities. Perhaps some Christians believe the church should move on to more pressing issues in the current social context, but in doing so, they surely risk ignoring the danger of wine and intoxicating drink crouching at the door. There are more alcohol products available than ever, more alcoholic content in those products than ever, more promotion of these products than ever, and tragically, in some settings, less preaching about the danger of those products than ever.

Satan is still “the father of lies” (Jn. 8:44). He has deceived the world before (Rev. 12:9–10) and continues to do so—including some in the church—despite the many warnings seen in Scripture. Wine is still a “mocker” and strong drink is still a “brawler” (Prov. 20:1), yet some Christians are no longer warning against the consumption or abuse of alcohol among God’s people. As the world changes, let us note some factors that have led God’s people to this place and offer thoughts on God-honoring realities that have not changed.

Our Changing World

The consumption and abuse of alcoholic beverages have been the way of the world for a long time, but how did it so quickly become the manner of life that many Christians tolerate or even promote? First, the promotion of alcohol products and access to alcohol have increased. The reach of digital ads and product placement has led to a 400 percent increase in advertisements related to alcohol consumption over the last forty years (“Alcohol”). Alcohol ad campaigns promote slimmer, “healthier” options in a variety of

sizes and colors. While some have denied any connection between increased advertisements and alcohol consumption, the statistics tell another story. For example, in 2023, almost 9 percent of adult women in the United States, which amounts to about 11.7 million women, struggled with alcoholism (Anderson 50–51). Based on those statistics, in a group of 300 women, 27 of them could be struggling with an issue related to alcohol consumption. Among a group of Christian women, that number would certainly be lower, but in reality, even in churches, that number would not be zero. Thus, yesteryear’s image of alcohol consumption being primarily among middle-aged men sitting around a dark barroom has been replaced by the realities of moms, college students, and other working adults consuming more alcoholic beverages than ever before.

*As alcohol becomes
normalized among
Christians, the danger
increases and God’s
glory diminishes.*

Second, the picture the alcohol industry promotes wrongly suggests that the consumption of alcohol leads to friends and happiness. Christian leaders should not ignore the data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), which shows that alcohol-related deaths are continually on the rise as excessive alcohol use is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, with 178,000 dying in 2020–21. This is a 29 percent increase from 2016–17. This amounts to 488 people dying because of alcohol every day (“Facts”). A far cry from the temperance movement of the early twentieth century, culture now declares that drinking alcohol is the normative way to relax, celebrate a wedding or another special occasion, or simply enjoy time with friends.

Christians must not be deceived. The consumption and abuse of alcoholic beverages are not just a matter of conscience or individual freedom. Lives continue to be destroyed, addictions are maintained, judgments are impaired, and families continue to be ruined. What Christian virtue will be aided through the influence of alcohol? How should Christians respond to the normalization of the consumption of alcohol among Christians?

The Unchanging Truth

From the beginning, God made humans with the ability to choose whether to obey him or not. In Genesis 2:15–17, we see that God took man and put him in the garden with a job “to tend and keep it” (2:15). In the next several verses, God reminds man that he had a choice to make. He could choose to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or not. God did not build a fence around the tree or pre-program him to make a certain choice; rather, God gave humanity the ability to choose and to bear the consequences of their actions. Throughout Scripture, readers see this pattern continue. Men and women, made by God in his image, can discern the difference between right and wrong. They make their own choices, knowing that those choices are in line with God’s will—or not.

Yet, there are some helpful principles that can guide Christians in making God-honoring choices, even as alcohol abuse and consumption increase. First, the church must proclaim that just because culture is choosing to accept or practice something does not mean God’s people should. “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify” (1 Cor. 10:23). A few chapters earlier, the inspired apostle wrote, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (6:12). Paul goes on in that context to talk about the need for Christians to be holy as temples of God

and to avoid sexual sin. Despite the normalization of alcohol consumption, the church must preach that the consumption of alcohol is not a profitable choice.

Second, personal faith is not as important as others’ faith. Perhaps some would challenge what is being written here by reminding the writer of our freedoms as Americans. One may ask, “Who are you to determine whether I consume alcohol or not?” While this writer does not want to bind what God has not bound, Paul uses the example of food and drink, writing, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Some were offended by eating meat, especially meat that had been sacrificed to idols, as others were partaking of the “cup of demons” (10:21). Paul’s concern was primarily about the purity and unity of the body of Christ. In Romans 14:15, he commands, “Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.” Then in Romans 14:20 he wrote, “Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food.” The overall principle of Romans 14 then comes in verse 21: “It is good neither to eat meat **nor drink wine** nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.” Despite the normalization of alcohol consumption, the church must preach that the consumption of alcohol is not primarily about individual freedoms; instead, it is about the purity, unity, and stability of God’s people.

As Christians, our behavior impacts how those outside of Christ view Christ and his body. In Romans 14:16–17, we are warned, “Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” As Christians, our first love should be helping as many people as possible to be saved (13:13–14). In a context where alcohol abuse has taken many lives and taken many others captive, let us “pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another” (14:19). Despite the normalization

of alcohol consumption, the church must preach that alcohol does not produce more godly behavior.

Yes, drunkenness is forbidden, and strong drink is forbidden, but more than that, Christians must remember that sober Christian influence is central to the identity of God's people. Alcohol consumption does not produce good stewards (Prov. 23:21), nor does it make one more stable (Isa. 24:20). It can lead people into captivity (28:1). Alcohol use can hinder one's ability to be a good neighbor and produce shame rather than a good example (Hab. 2:15–16). Alcohol does not make people healthier (Jer. 25:27). It does not help one to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Eph. 5:18); it limits perception and sound judgment (Prov. 23:29–35). Alcohol consumption does not produce Christian fellowship (1 Cor. 5:11), nor God-honoring speech (Acts 2:15). It does not make God's people more effective stewards at work (Lk. 12:45–46); it does not lead to clearer thinking (Lk. 21:34). It does not promote what is honorable and decent (Rm. 13:13). It does not increase the chances of one entering God's prepared kingdom (Gal. 5:21).

Conclusion

With the realities of the devastating effects of alcohol consumption and abuse on the one hand and the warnings of Scripture on the other, what questions ought God's people ask? Perhaps Christians should ask, "Will alcohol help or hinder ..."

- My own spiritual condition?
- My pursuit of heaven?
- My growth in faith?
- My ability in bearing the fruit of the Spirit?
- My family?
- My opportunity to become a better husband, wife, mother, or father?
- My work in the local congregation?

What if Lot had asked these questions? Alcohol was used in connection with the

incest he committed with his own daughters (Gen. 19:30–35). What if King David had asked these questions? He tried to use alcohol to cover up his sin by making Uriah so drunk he could better hide his iniquity with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:13). In all of these biblical examples, the primary question regards how the use of alcohol helps me be a better disciple.

Every Christian has a choice to make, even as alcohol becomes more prevalent and normalized, even among our brothers and sisters. What choice will best honor God? What choice will best build up the body of Christ? Let every Christian live in a manner that puts God's will and work first. Alcohol consumption is still a problem. It is readily available and popular, and it offers a cheap substitute for the connection and accountability found among God's people. How can the church save the world and promote such a destructive choice? God has commissioned his people to offer something far better than the things of this world. Let us be sober and not be deceived. Wine is still a "mock-er," and strong drink is still a "brawler." Let us have no association with Babylon (Isa. 52:11; Rev. 18:4).

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OLD TESTAMENT WARNINGS AGAINST INTOXICATING DRINK

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Believers since ancient times have debated the dangers of drink. It seems quite clear from the Old Testament that total abstinence from alcohol was the preferred course. Priests

who officiated on behalf of the people were strictly ordered not to drink on duty (Ezek. 44:21). Moses commands, “Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations” (Lev. 10:9 [all translations of the Bible are taken from the NKJV]). The threat of death underscores how serious God is about his instruction.

The average Israelite would not be expected to officiate in the tabernacle, but a temporary path to priestly holiness was permitted to the Nazirite. He, too, is forbidden from drinking, for “he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from similar drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin” (Num. 6:3–4). The comprehensive nature of this command suggests that the fear of fermented beverages was considered of paramount importance in the law of the Nazirite.

In a proverbial piece of advice intended for rulers, king Lemuel quips, “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink” (Prov. 31:4). Kings were the supreme judges of ancient society; thus, they were required to keep a clear head. We know at least one group were noted for their abstinence from alcohol. Unfortunately, the full history of the Rechabites remains a mystery, but we know their ancestor assisted Jehu in the slaughter of the idolatrous family of Ahab and the priests of Baal (2 Kgs. 10:15–24). He apparently forbade the ingestion of fermented beverages, a command his descendants kept for centuries (Jer. 35:5–10).

When we discuss the biblical teaching on alcohol, it seems clear that total abstinence is the aim. Those who wish to be pure are not to drink any fermented beverage. This ought to be the end of the conversation. If I can know what God prefers, then I should not wonder what I can get away with. Such is not the nature of our world. So, perhaps we should delve a bit deeper into the issue of intoxicating drink in biblical times.

Wine in Bible Times

When one considers the question of wine and the Bible, it is important to understand that we are comparing the proverbial “apples and oranges.” The assumption inherent in such a comparison is that biblical wine is the same as modern wine. It is not. While certain catalysts, such as

honey, could be used in ancient times to increase the alcoholic content of a beverage, most drinks were allowed to ferment naturally. Naturally fermented fruit products would rise to an alcoholic content of approximately 3–5 percent, a fraction of the standard of 11–13 percent alcohol by volume in modern wine. So, straight, unmixed, wine in ancient times would have been, on average, far less alcoholic than table wine today.

Second, virtually every ancient culture mixed water into wine. While this may have been done to purify the water as much as to detoxify the wine, the ratio of water to wine was always balanced in favor of the water. The standard measurement by Roman times was 3:1, or three parts water to one part wine. It is useful to quote the Greek author Plutarch: “We call a mixture ‘wine,’ although the larger of the component parts is water” (*Advice to the Bride and Groom* 140F). Jewish literature also recommends mixing water with wine. A book of the Apocrypha, 2 Maccabees, has, “it is harmful to drink wine alone or, again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water produces a delightful taste . . .” (15:39 *New English Translation of the Septuagint*). The Jewish author recognizes that water was a common source of illness in ancient times, and straight wine could disable the senses.

Instructions like these probably lie behind Paul’s advice to Timothy: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities” (1 Tim. 5:23). Unfortunately, many have misread this verse as an endorsement of straight wine for medicinal purposes. Paul is not saying that. He seems to be allowing Timothy to mix a little wine with his water to avoid becoming sick. Just like the author of 2 Maccabees states, water alone could create digestive issues. Paul thought it best to purify water with a relatively low-alcohol beverage to improve digestion.

Old Testament Words for Fermented Drink

We tend to discuss wine more than any other alcoholic beverage because it is the most frequently used term in Scripture to describe a fermented drink. The general term in biblical Hebrew for vineyard produce is *yayin*, which occurs 141 times in the Old Testament. Since wine naturally ferments after just a few weeks, even under cool temperatures, aged *yayin* would have included some alcohol (again, no more than 3–5 percent). When the Bible speaks of drunkenness from *yayin*, therefore, we must envision the ingestion of massive quantities of the substance (e.g., Jer. 23:9; Psa. 60:3). Further, we can assume that *yayin* was most often mixed with water and imbibed by people of all ages. For example, children drank *yayin* (Lam. 2:11–12).

The closest equivalent to freshly squeezed grape juice in biblical Hebrew is *tirosh*. More accurately, the term refers to “must,” which is the juice of the grape still mixed with the skins, seeds, and stems of grapes that have just been crushed in the winepress (Hos. 9:2; Mic. 6:15; Prov. 3:10). Since *tirosh* can also describe the juice inside of the unplucked grape (Jd. 9:13; Isa. 65:8), we can surmise that “new wine” (as many translations render it) would have contained no alcohol. It is tempting to view *tirosh* as the juice still in the vat before it is channeled into a storage container. However, it is difficult to know whether the ancient Hebrews were so vigorous in their distinctions.

A third biblical Hebrew term for alcoholic drink is *shekar*. This term is conventionally translated “strong drink,” but a good case can be made for the term referring specifically to beer. The ancient Egyptians were expert beermakers, and it makes sense that a similar grain-based drink would find fans in surrounding countries. We normally think of beer as having a much lower alcoholic content than wine, but the opposite may have been the case in ancient Israel.

Perhaps the strength of the alcoholic content relates to its unmixed or fortified nature. One must resist the urge to associate *shekar* with modern “liquor,” which has a far higher alcoholic content than the biblical *shekar* would have had. Still, drinkers of *yayin* could *potentially* become intoxicated, but drinkers of *shekar* seem to have intoxication as their motivation. A *shikor* in biblical Hebrew is a drunkard (e.g., Isa. 19:14; Jer. 23:9; Psa. 107:27), and the verb *shakar* means “to become drunk” (e.g., Gen. 9:21; Jer. 25:27; Lam. 4:21).

Several other terms are rarer but describe various types of drink. The term *‘asis* refers to “sweet wine” before fermentation has set in. It would have been highly desirable, as it would have remained in this state for only a few days. The prophets look forward to the day when *‘asis* will drip from the mountains (Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13), and the lover offers pomegranate *‘asis* to her beloved (Song 8:2). The term *chemer* describes “foaming wine” in the early stages of fermentation (Deut. 32:14 ESV). It is worth pointing out that, though the fermentation is not complete, Scripture still describes “foaming wine” (*yayin chamar*) as a beverage mixed with water (Psa. 75:8). Other terms describe wine mixed with spices, which apparently enhances flavor and thus desirability. The terms *mesek* or *mimsak* literally mean “mixture” and seem to indicate certain spiced wines that were popular throughout the ancient world.

If the Hebrew language is consistent through time, then we can reconstruct the terminological distinctions between the various biblical Hebrew terms for wine or alcoholic drink. It starts as (1) *tirosh* from the time it is in the grapes till the juice is released through the channels in the wine vats. When it is collected into storage jars from the vats, it becomes (2) *‘asis*. It remains sweet wine until the fermentation process begins, at which point it becomes (3) *chemer*, which it remains for several weeks. After the fermentation process is

complete, the product becomes (4) *yayin*. This is the general term for wine because it remains in this state for the longest period of time. (Note: There are exceptions to *yayin* being fermented.) The term (5) *shekar* probably refers to beer or to some other highly intoxicating beverage. It is probably distinguished either by its unmixed nature or by its higher alcoholic content. For those who sought a mixed substance, spiced wine (*mesek*) was available, though we cannot determine the alcoholic content.

***The Old Testament
consistently presents
intoxicating drink
not as a harmless
custom, but as a
dangerous force
that destroys
judgment and lives.***

Analysis of Proverbs 23:29–35

Proverbs 23 contains the most detailed warning about wine drinking in the Bible. The portrait of the adulteress that comes immediately before the prohibition on wine accentuates the allurements of alcohol (23:26–28). No less than an extramarital affair, alcohol will destroy lives. The wise man is always on guard against temptation, and the dangers of alcohol must be taken seriously.

Six “who” questions launch a graphic poem portraying a drunkard’s life (23:29). The first two “who” statements feature interjections of despair. Literally, “Who has ‘woe?’ Who has ‘alas?’” These are terms uttered when one is at his wit’s end. The text then transitions to brawls and their results, basically asking, “Who starts fights and wakes up with strange wounds?” The “redness of eyes” (or “dullness of eyes”) could either

be a reference to bloodshot eyes due to a hangover, or to bloodied, swollen eyes from the night's brawl. The questions meet their answer in the next verse: "Those who linger long at the wine," and "those who go in search of mixed wine" (23:30). The former term is *yayin*, repeated in this section; the latter is "spiced wine" (*mimsak*), an especially desirable mixture that apparently held intoxicating properties.

After the initial question and answer, which serves as a sort of introduction, the inspired author moves to a command (23:31), the consequences (23:32–34), and the drunkard's conclusion (23:35). The command to the drunkard is not to "look at wine when it is red" (23:31). The tense of the verb translated "it is red" creates an image of wine rolling and listing in the cup, flashing shades of color as the wine swirls in the glass. One imagines the connoisseur of modern times sniffing the wine, swirling it in the cup, and taking a swig to be sloshed around the palate. The Bible understands the process of addiction, walking us through the addict's psychology.

The next statement is difficult to translate. Literally, "its eye gives" is translated "sparkles" in many versions. Perhaps it refers to "bubbling" as modern champagne or to wine's property of reflecting a brilliant red color. In either case, the wine "moveth itself aright" (KJV), which most modern translations render "it goes down smoothly." The idea is that its visual attraction is matched by its pleasing taste.

The author immediately launches into the consequences of drinking the wine. The end of the process is not delight but snakebite. The image is vivid, for the bite of a poisonous serpent brings about lightheadedness, hallucinations, blackouts, fever, vomiting, and throbbing headaches (23:32). These physiological symptoms are exacerbated by the total loss of one's faculties. Hallucinations and forgotten speech (23:33) are nothing in comparison to blackouts, described as

sleeping in the midst of the sea (23:34). The idea seems to be the sensation of the room spinning though the victim retains no lasting memory of the event.

The conclusion is sad, for it features the victim acknowledging that he was assaulted without memory of feeling it. Still, despite alcohol's adverse effects, the drunkard dreams of his next drink, asking, "When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?" (23:35). The addict can recognize the side effects, hate himself for his weakness, regret his drunken behavior, and somehow, still fall prey to the temptations of alcohol.

Conclusion

The Old Testament clearly and consistently presents total abstinence from intoxicating beverages as God's standard. We can see this standard at work in the lives of kings, priests, and others who wish to maintain a strict state of holiness. This standard was upheld despite the alcoholic content of ancient wine being far less than modern wine, and despite the general ancient custom of mixing wine with water. Given the historical and biblical data, it seems difficult to defend modern alcohol consumption.

Various terms are used to describe biblical wine, indicating a strict classification of beverages based on the state of their preservation. While ancient peoples lacked a way of measuring the precise amount of alcohol in a beverage, they most certainly had terms to distinguish fresh, new wine from fermented, fortified, or spiced wine. That the Hebrews were not ignorant of the effects of alcohol can be proven from Proverbs 23:29–35, which is a vivid description of a drunkard's foolishness. Since the book of Proverbs takes the shape of advice to the young, we can take the warnings of chapter 23 as general instructions to note the dangers of alcohol (1:4, 8–19).

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DRINKING PARTIES

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Old sayings about the Bible die hard. Claims like “We are born sinners” and “There will be signs before Jesus comes again” are common but unbiblical. Like Jews in the time of

Jesus, people today quote these traditions like they are Scripture. Add to this list the view that “The Bible is against getting drunk but not drinking.” When the issue of social drinking arises, these are often the first words heard in defense of it.

This popular belief is not true. Peter said, “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” (1 Pet. 4:3). Three words in this verse involve drinking alcohol. The first is “excess of wine” in the King James Version. Other translations have “drunkenness” (NKJV, NASB, ESV). The Greek word is οἰνοφλυγία, a compound word—οἶνος, wine, and φλύω, to bubble up or overflow; thus, literally an overflowing of wine. This word stresses the amount of alcohol a person consumes and the obvious effects that follow.

The second word is “revellings,” from κῶμος, “a revel, carousal, that is, in the Greek writers properly a nocturnal and riotous procession of half-drunken and frolicsome fellows, who after supper parade through the streets with torches and music, in honor of Bacchus or some other deity, and sing, and play before the houses

of their male and female friends; hence used generally, of *feasts and drinking parties that are protracted till late at night and indulge in revelry*” (Thayer, 367). This word emphasizes the atmosphere that goes with drinking.

The third word is “banquetings,” from πότος, a noun which means a *drinking*. That is the most literal English translation of the word. The words “potable” or “non potable” are English derivatives of this Greek word. Like the first two words, this word is plural and means *drinkings*. It is only used in this verse in the New Testament. That is why it is important to look at ancient uses of it outside the New Testament.

The Septuagint uses this word for a *feast* or *banquet*. It does not by itself indicate how much the people drank or even if they drank alcohol. For instance, the Septuagint says in Genesis 19:3 that Lot “made a feast (πότος) for them, and baked unleavened cakes for them, and they did eat.” Does that sound like this πότος was a “drinking party”—that Lot and these two angels were drunk? There is no indication that they were even drinking alcohol.

On the other hand, *sometimes* alcohol was served with a meal called πότος in the Septuagint. Some at those banquets were intoxicated. In 1 Samuel 25, Nabal “had a banquet (πότος) at his house, as the banquet (πότος) of a king, and the heart of Nabal was merry within him, and he was very drunken” (25:36). We do not know Nabal was drunk because of the word πότος. We know this because the Bible specifically says he was “very drunken.”

In most cases πότος is used in the Septuagint in a general sense without any clear indication of drunkenness. Samson made a “feast” (πότος) for his friends (Jd. 14:10, 12, 17). David made a “feast” (πότος) for Abner (2 Sam. 3:20). It is used numerous times in the book of Esther for royal banquets. Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting” (πότος). These examples show that πότος is used broadly in the Septuagint and is not a synonym for drunkenness.

Ancient Greeks used this word to refer to drinking at feasts. As in the Septuagint, the use and amount of alcohol consumed varied. Plutarch wrote that Pyrrhus was upset because the people of Tarentum wanted him to fight the Romans for them while they stayed at home bathing and feasting (Plutarch, *The Parallel Lives*, 321). In response, he closed the gyms and public walks and put an end to πότους or drinking banquets, revels (κώμους), and festivals. These πότους could have involved drunkenness, especially since they are mentioned with revels or carousings. But they are also mentioned with things that do not necessarily refer to drunkenness: public walks, gyms, and festivals.

The *Letter of Aristeas*, written around the second or third century B.C., mentions a king holding a “banquet” which Aristeas called a πότος (Aristeas, 261–262). He also used the word συμποσία which means drinking together and thus the word *symposium*. The symposium was a gathering of Greek men who drank and talked about politics and philosophy. But drunkenness, though it may have occurred, was not the focal aspect of a traditional Greek symposium. At the πότος Aristeas mentions, they were *toasting*, especially to their health, but there is no clear emphasis on drunkenness.

Xenophon, writing around 400 B.C., described one of these banquets in detail. High-ranking Greek military officers and

Thracians gathered for a feast. Xenophon said they were seated in a circle and dinner was served. Servants brought in three-legged stools that were piled up with meat and had huge loaves of bread fastened to the meat with long skewers. They feasted on this meat and bread as much as they wanted. Xenophon says, “Then beakers of wine were brought round, and everyone partook in turn” (Xenophon, 7.3).

Then he wrote, “When the drinking (πότος) had advanced somewhat . . .” So, *before* the drinking had “advanced,” it was a πότος, a drinking! He does not even say they were all “drunk.” In fact, he said of one of the officers who addressed the crowd, “The wine had perhaps a little mounted to his head.” There were different levels of how much the people drank and different degrees of the effects of drinking alcohol, and that is the idea of πότος—*drinking*.

Hesychius of Alexandria was an ancient Greek lexicographer who compiled an impressive list of thousands of Greek words. Although he composed his Greek lexicon after the New Testament was written—sometime in the 400s or 500s—he was still much better acquainted with Greek than German or English scholars who lived hundreds of years later. His native language was Greek, and his lexicon was not limited to Greek words used in his day. His work incorporated earlier lexicons that showed how Greeks had used these words. That fact is significant because it shows that the meaning of πότος did not evolve from drinking in general in earlier Greek to a necessarily drunken feast by New Testament times (and later).

His lexicon gives these Greek words for the meaning of πότος (Hesychius, 1269): εὐωχία (banquet, feasting), ἄριστον (breakfast in old Greek and in later Greek dinner) and δαῖπνον (the evening meal). If πότος *necessarily* means drunkenness, then why did Hesychius not give at least one Greek word to denote that idea? He could

have listed words that clearly meant drunkenness: οἰνοφλυγία, μέθη, κραιπάλη—all of which are used in the New Testament. One modern lexicon claims that κραιπάλη (“carousings” in Luke 21:34) is a synonym for πότος (Abbott-Smith, 375). But Hesychius did not make that connection. In the entry for κραιπάλη, he gave μέθη (“drunkenness” in Luke 21:34), not πότος.

Many argue that πότος is a party where people necessarily display outward signs of drunkenness. If this is true, then why did this ancient Greek lexicographer not give at least one word for intoxication as the meaning of πότος? This general usage in ancient Greek shows that πότος “does not necessarily imply excessiveness, though it does provide an opportunity for excess” (Trench, 239).

Older translations tend to translate this word literally. The Latin Vulgate has *potationibus* (drinkings or banquetings). The Wycliffe translation and the Geneva Bible have “drinkings.” Tyndale has “drinkinge.” The King James translators similarly use the word “banquetings.” The American Standard Version gives a weak translation—“carousings”—a concept already expressed in the previous word (κῶμος, “revellings”). On the other hand, more recent translations expand on the idea and have “drinking parties” (ESV, NASB, NKJV).

Modern lexicons similarly define πότος in 1 Peter 4:3 as “drinking, especially a drinking party” (Arndt and Gingrich, 696), “a drinking, carousing” (Thayer, 533), “drinking, symposium” (Brill, 1732), “drinking-bout, carousal” (Liddell-Scott, 1456), “a drinking bout: cf. the meaning ‘banquet’ in Genesis 19:3 and Aristes 262” (Moulton-Milligan, 531).

Notice that the first word these lexicons use is *drinking*, not drunkenness. Arndt and Gingrich admit that πότος is a general word for drinking when they say it means

“drinking, especially a drinking party.” The words drinking “parties” or drinking “bouts” may give the impression that a πότος was a party where alcohol was the main or even the only beverage served or a competition where the participants tried to outdrink each other. But that is not the sole idea in ancient Greek usage. The words “parties” and “bouts” are at least unnecessary and at worst misleading.

***Scripture does not
separate drinking
from drunkenness,
but exposes drinking
itself as the beginning
of the very sin
it condemns.***

This general meaning of πότος as *drinking* in 1 Peter 4:3 is consistent with other Bible teaching on the use of alcohol. Proverbs 23:31–32 says, “Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper.” We are not to look upon the wine in the cup. To “look upon” does not mean simply to see. It does not merely mean a physical craving for alcohol like a recovering alcoholic has. It means not to look upon it with favor and approval. It means not to have a curious interest in it. In Habakkuk 1:13, the prophet said, “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil,” that is, God cannot look at evil with approval or favor. Since Solomon said we are not to look at wine with approval or interest, then how can anyone say it is right to *take that cup and drink it*? We sometimes say that the sin of drinking begins with the first drink. Actually, it begins *before* the first drink.

Defenders of social drinking usually say, “You’re taking that out of context. Read

the verses after this. He's talking about drunkenness." Solomon does talk about the effects of alcohol. Alcohol causes grief, wounds without cause, and redness of eyes (23:29). This happens when one lingers long with wine (23:30). Alcohol results in lack of restraint, dizzy feelings, and addiction (23:33–35).

But just because Solomon describes the results of drinking to the point of these outward effects does not mean it is alright to drink less. Consider the sin of lust in Proverbs 6. Solomon warns against being seduced by evil women. He said, "Do not lust after her beauty in your heart" (6:25). Then in the next ten verses he describes what happens when a man commits adultery with a woman. He will pay for his sin. This does not mean that it is wrong for a man to lust after a woman *only if* he commits adultery with her. Lust is wrong even if he never commits adultery (Mt. 5:28). The word "lust" in these verses is not merely a physical desire. It is sexual longing a person chooses to feel toward a woman who is not his wife. Acting on that lust by committing adultery just makes it worse.

If lust for a woman in Proverbs 6 is wrong, even if a man does not commit adultery with her, then longing with approval for and taking the first drink in Proverbs 23 is wrong even if a person does not display the eventual outward effects of drinking.

The meaning of πότος in 1 Peter 4:3 is evident from three considerations. First, the internal context of this verse indicates both similarities and *distinctions* in the three words used for drinking alcohol. Drinking (πότος) is distinguished from drunkenness (οἶνοφλυγία). Second, Greek usage before, during, and after the time of the New Testament indicates that πότος is a general word that covers different amounts of alcohol consumed and different degrees of intoxication. Third, this meaning is consistent with the overall

context of passages that condemn drinking (Prov. 23:31; 20:1).

In his comments on First Peter 4:3, A. T. Robertson wrote, "In the light of these words it seems strange to find modern Christians justifying their 'personal liberty' to drink and carouse" (Robertson, 122). Here is a question for those who say the Bible condemns "drunkenness, but not drinking." *If God had wanted to say that drinking is wrong*, how could he have said it more plainly than to use a Greek word that means *drinking*?

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NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING ON SOBRIETY AND SELF-CONTROL

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Readers know that the meaning of an unfamiliar word can often be determined by its context. This is readily done when the unfamiliar word is in contrast to a known word. Take for example the word *psuchros*. *Psuchros* is an anglicized Greek word that you may have never seen before, but if you were to read, “Because thou art lukewarm, and neither *psuchros* nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth” (Rev. 3:16), you would immediately conclude that *psuchros* means cold in contrast to hot. If you were to read, “No man having drunk old wine straightway desireth *neos*: for he saith, The old is better” (Lk. 5:39), you would see the contrast with old that tells us that *neos* means new.

Nepho: Soberity

When you read, “They that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be *nepho*” (1 Thes. 5:7–8), you already know what *nepho* means. *Nepho* is contrasted with drunken. *Nepho* means “not drunken.” The English word that the translators used for *nepho* is “sober.” Greek lexicons and dictionaries bear this out. (I use the word *nepho* to include the family of words associated with the same root.) *Nepho* words mean, “to be sober, temperate, abstinent in respect to wine, vigilant, not intoxicated, in the N.T. metaphorically, to be diligent, circumspect, self-control” (Mounce, 1217); “to abstain from wine (keep sober), that is, (figuratively) be discreet” (Strong, 67); “to be sober,

calm and collected in spirit, to be temperate, dispassionate, circumspect, to abstain from wine either entirely, or at least from immoderate use” (Thayer, 425); “free from the influence of intoxicants” (Vine, 1057).

The lexicographers tell us that the word is used figuratively and metaphorically. That is because the word is used to describe a sober state of mind. Alcohol literally robs the mind of sobriety, but alcohol is not all that can take sobriety from the mind. Metaphorically, the passions of anger, fear, lust, and pride are also enemies of sobriety. When Isaiah preached, “Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim . . .” (Isa. 28:1), he was preaching metaphorically. Ephraim was drunk with pride. Isaiah goes on to say, “They also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean” (28:7–8). Whether they were “out of the way” by their pride or their wine, the mental effect was the same: “They err in vision, they stumble in judgment.” Lust can steal sobriety from the mind. Consider the context of “God gave them over to a reprobate mind” (Rm. 1:28). *Nepho* is a fit metaphor for a fit mind, because alcohol inflames anger, lust, and impertinence.

Note also the lexicographer’s words “abstain,” “not intoxicated,” and “free from the influence.” Those who think they can drink without getting drunk are getting drunk

before they know it. The initial effects of alcohol are mental. With the first drink, one begins to feel relaxed rather than watchful, and euphoric rather than real. The drug-induced euphoria is fake. Alcohol impairs judgment before it impairs speech or motion. Isaiah said, “They stumble in judgment” (28:7). It is the impaired judgment that lowers inhibitions and induces irresponsible confidence. By the time you feel it, you are already drunken, no longer sober, and you may not have the judgment to realize it.

Peter wrote, “Gird up the loins of your mind and be sober (*nepho*)” (1 Pet. 1:13). The image of “girding up the loins” has to do with getting control of loose garments; “girding up the loins of the mind” is metaphorical and has to do with getting control of loose thoughts. Controlling the thoughts of your mind is what it means to be *nephos* (sober).

It is because *nepho* (sobriety) has to do with having an alert mind that Paul wrote, “Watch (*nepho*) thou in all things” (2 Tim. 4:5). It is why Peter wrote, “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch (*nepho*) unto prayer (1 Pet. 4:7), and “Be sober (*nepho*), be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (5:8).

Nepho (sobriety) is contrasted with alcohol consumption in Titus 2:2–3. Here aged men are told to be “sober (*nepho*),” and aged women are told to be “not given to much wine.” In 1 Timothy 3:2, bishops are to be “vigilant (*nepho*),” and in 1 Timothy 3:3 they are not to be “given to wine.” In 1 Timothy 3:8, deacons are to be “not given to much wine,” and in 1 Timothy 3:11, their wives are to be “sober (*nepho*).” The context tells us the meaning of *nepho*. He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear.

Sophron: Sobriety

If you were reading carefully, you may have noticed that *nepho* is translated “watch” in

1 Peter 4:7 rather than “sober.” The word translated “sober” in 1 Peter 4:7 is of a family of words associated with the adjective *sophron*. Peter wrote, “The end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober (*sophron*), and watch (*nepho*) unto prayer.” *Sophron* has an interesting etymology. The first part of the word, *so-*, comes from *sozo*, meaning “to save or keep safe.” The second part, *-phron*, is from *phren*, meaning “the mind, the intellect, and the understanding” (Thayer, 610, 613, 658). First Corinthians 14:20 says, “Brethren, be not children in understanding (*phren*): howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding (*phren*) be men.” Put the parts together and *so-phron* means “to save, keep, protect, guard, and preserve the mind.” The *sophron* family of words are good words to study when considering alcohol, because the drink dissolves mental defenses.

***Sobriety in Scripture
demands more than
moderation—it
requires a mind
untouched by
intoxicating influence.***

When Festus heard Paul preach the resurrection of Christ, Festus lost his noble composure and said with a loud voice, “Paul, thou art beside thyself; and much learning doth make thee mad.” Paul respectfully replied, “I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness (*sophron*)” (Acts 26:24–25). The contrast tells us the meaning of the word; to be *sophron* is to be composed and in the right mind. In 2 Corinthians 5:13, Paul wrote, “Whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober (*sophron*), it is for your cause.” The contrast tells us that to be *sophron* is to retain your wits. Vine says of the

sophron family of words, “of sound mind . . . self-controlled . . . it suggests the exercise of that self-restraint that governs all passions and desires, enabling the believer to be conformed to the mind of Christ” (Vine, 1057).

Men are to “think soberly (*sophron*)” (Rm. 12:3). Women are to adorn themselves with “sobriety (*sophron*)” (1 Tim. 2:9). They are to “continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety (*sophron*)” (2:15). Bishops are to be “sober (*sophron*)” and of good behavior (3:2). Elders are to be “sober (*sophron*), just, holy, temperate” (Tit. 1:8). Aged men are to be “temperate” (*sophron*); aged women who are “not given to much wine” are to teach young women to be “discreet (*sophron*);” and likewise young men are to be “sober minded (*sophron*)” (2:2–6). “Denying ungodliness and worldly lust, we should live soberly (*sophronos*), righteously, and godly, in this present world” (2:12). Paul wrote, “God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind (*sophron*)” (2 Tim. 1:7).

Engkrateia: Temperance

“Temperance” is a word that has long been associated with alcohol aversion. As early as 1826, the American Temperance Society was established. Within ten years, over a million members of that society had pledged to abstain from alcohol. In some quarters, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday is still known as “Temperance Sunday.” The word *evgkrateia* is translated “temperance” in the New Testament, and while it includes self-control around alcohol, like *nepho* and *sophron*, it has a broader application. “Every man that striveth for mastery is temperate (*evgkrateia*) in all things” (1 Cor. 9:25).

Strength (*kratos*) is at the heart of *evgkrateia* (temperance). It is inner strength, the strength to control oneself. Felix had a temperance problem. When Paul reasoned of “righteousness, temperance (*engkrateia*), and judgment to come, Felix trembled” (Acts 24:25). Some of our intemperate

brethren would do well to learn to tremble like Felix. Though often neglected, temperance was a respected virtue in old Rome. Paul wrote of temperance (*evgkrateia*), saying “against such there is no law” (Gal. 5:23). An elder in the church is to be characterized by *evgkrateia* (temperance) (Tit. 1:8). It is a virtue; we are to abundantly supply to faith, virtue, and knowledge (2 Pet. 1:5–6).

Temperance is not to be confused with moderation. While temperance includes moderation in things lawful, it means abstinence in that which is unlawful. *Evgkrateia* is translated “contain” in 1 Corinthians 7:9. In that context, it means abstinence from fornication.

Our Sober Savior

Jesus lived a life characterized by watchfulness, sobriety, and temperance. He was sober-minded from the time he was sitting in the midst of the doctors in the temple (Lk. 2:46), to the time he came to John for baptism and said, “Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). He was not caught off guard when Satan came tempting him in the wilderness (4:1–11). The zeal of his father’s house had eaten him up when he drove the money changers from the temple, but he was the master of the situation because he retained the mastery of himself (Jn. 2:13–17). As his fame grew and as the crowds gathered, his friends said, “He is beside himself” (Mk. 3:21), but in this they were mistaken; he knew what he was doing and why he was doing it. He cautioned his disciples, “I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Mt. 10:16). Those who came to “entangle him in his talk” heard his words, “marveled, and left him, and went their way” (Mt. 22:15–22). In his agony, he failed not to pray, “Thy will be done” (26:42). On trial, he knew when to speak and when to be silent, and “Pilate marveled” (Mk. 15:5). Just before they crucified him, “They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he tasted thereof, he would not drink” (Mt.

27:34). Jesus died sober, “that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man” (Heb. 2:9).

The next time you are tempted to taste of the intoxicating brew, remember the lyrics, “Oh! to be like Thee! . . . pure as Thou art! . . . stamp Thine own image deep on my heart,” and put the glass away.

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THE CASE FOR CHRISTIAN ABSTINENCE

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In 1914, during a legislative debate over the regulation of alcohol, Noah Sweat, a representative in the Mississippi House of Representatives, offered a deliberately satirical speech to illustrate how some of his fellow-representatives were equivocating on their stance regarding alcohol. Here is what Representative Sweat said:

If when you say alcohol, you mean the devil’s brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, deadens reason, destroys homes, creates misery and poverty; if you mean the drink that ruins righteous living, creates despair, shame, and helplessness, and kills thousands every year, then certainly, I am against it with all my power! However, if when you say alcohol, you mean the oil of conversation, the

philosophic wine, the drink that makes hearts merry and puts laughter on one’s lips; if you mean the drink that celebrates Christmas cheer, puts a spring in your walk, and stimulates conversation between good old fellows; if you mean the drink, the sale of which provides money for crippled children, the aged, the building of highways, hospitals, and schools, then certainly, I stand firmly in favor of it! This is my stand on alcohol, and I simply refuse to compromise.

Although more than one hundred years have passed, Representative Sweat’s satirical comment remains as timely today as it ever was. A great number of Christians today seem to equivocate in ways very similar to Sweat’s satirical comments on the consumption of alcohol as a beverage.

The debate as to whether it is pleasing to God to consume alcohol as a beverage is certainly not new. While all involved in this debate today would condemn drunkenness

(Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:18; Rm. 13:13), some suggest that the moderate drinking of alcohol is permissible.

If drinking alcohol is permissible, I certainly do not want to “spy out” anyone’s “liberty” (Gal. 2:4) and bind my scruples upon them. But, if drinking alcohol is not permissible, I want to do what I can to warn people of its deception and dangers.

A Case for Abstinence

Spiritual Wisdom and Holiness. Spiritual wisdom is not defined by how close one may approach danger without crossing a forbidden line, but by the discernment to choose what best promotes faithfulness, love, and self-control. When considered through this lens, abstinence from alcohol stands as a spiritually wise decision rather than an expression of prudish legalism.

The Bible repeatedly warns of the dangers associated with wine and strong drink because of its capacity to deceive, impair judgment, and dull our senses. Solomon plainly warned, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Prov. 20:1). Three chapters later, he again portrayed wine as destructive and warned against even looking at it when it is intoxicating (23:31).

Even from our own lived experiences, we are well aware of the immeasurable destruction alcohol has caused. Death, broken families, violence, crime, abuse, addiction, and disease are constant companions of alcohol. Jesus told us that we can examine the fruit to know whether a tree is good or bad. A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit (Mt. 7:16–20). When examining the fruit of intoxicating beverages, spiritual wisdom dictates that we flee from involvement with it. No one can argue about the nature of the fruit of alcohol. Its wake of destruction is evident and undeniable.

Further, spiritual wisdom does not require that we taste for ourselves the fruit of alcohol before we can pass judgment upon it. Spiritual wisdom does not require a personal catastrophe before it makes an evaluation; it learns from history and the wake of destruction in others.

*Abstinence from
alcohol is not
legalism, but a wise
and holy choice
that honors God.*

The author of the book of Hebrews made a statement that should grab and hold the attention of all who desire to be with God in heaven someday. He wrote, “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (12:14). In light of the sin, death, and destruction that are such close companions to alcohol, how could anyone claim to be pursuing holiness while imbibing in a substance the Bible warns us to avoid because of its destructive nature?

Influence. Few, if any, take their first drink of alcohol with the intent of losing their self-control and becoming a slave to alcohol. This truth is a testimony of the power and danger of alcohol.

In more than four decades of preaching, I have talked to many people who defend “social drinking,” or “drinking alcohol in moderation.” Whenever I meet those who defend such a practice, I ask them if they have ever inadvertently crossed the line and drank too much. To date, I have never had any “social drinker” tell me that he/she had never crossed the line. While such evidence is anecdotal, I am forced to wonder why Christians would choose to act in a way and influence others in a way that they, themselves, are unable to control.

God expects us to give great deference to the weak (Rm. 15:1–3). While Paul was speaking of “scruples” in this context, would it not be even more applicable with regard to actions that are sinful? We should not demand our “perceived” rights at the ruination of a weak brother adversely impacted by our influence and choices. Love and spiritual wisdom pursue a course that unquestionably honors and glorifies God and respects others, for whom Jesus died.

The Word “Wine.” The Hebrew word *yayin* is translated by the Greek word *oinos* and is then translated by the English word, “wine.” In our usage today, we think of the word “wine” as exclusively intoxicating. However, such was not the case with the Hebrew and Greek words. These are generic words. They can certainly refer to fermented juice from grapes (Gen. 9:21; Eph. 5:18), but they can also refer to unfermented juice from grapes (Jd. 13:4; Isa. 16:10; Gen. 40:11). Context must decide.

The import of this truth is that just as it would be wrong if every time you read the word “Kool-Aid,” you interpreted it as “poisoned Kool-Aid,” it would be wrong if every time you read the words *yayin/oinos/wine*, you interpreted it as intoxicating wine. The English word “wine,” translated from the Greek word *oinos* is a broad, generic term for wine or grape-based drink, and its intoxicating quality is determined by context, not by the word itself. Therefore, reading the word “wine” in our Bibles does not give one the green light to imbibe in intoxicating drinks.

In fact, many of the passages that people claim give approval to drinking alcohol, when considered within their contexts, are talking about non-intoxicating wines.

Denigrating the Ethic and Character of Jesus

While I am concerned by what some who do not agree with the course of abstinence are teaching, I am even more concerned about

the impact their argumentation has on the reputation of Jesus.

A common argument for the moderate consumption of intoxicating beverages typically goes like this: “Jesus drank intoxicating beverages, while opposing drunkenness. Not only did he, himself, drink them, he miraculously produced intoxicating beverages, and distributed them to others. Now if Jesus, our perfect example, drank, made, and distributed intoxicating beverages to be consumed in moderation, then who are we to condemn the moderate consumption of alcohol today?”

Yet after making this argument, they will immediately back pedal and say something like this: “While it is perfectly pleasing to God to drink alcohol in moderation, we need to be extremely careful about our reputation and influence we have on others. We certainly do not want our liberty to cause another person to stumble. Therefore, I would recommend that you do not drink alcoholic beverages in public, but out of deference to others, confine your moderate drinking to the privacy of your own home. This way, your reputation will not be tarnished, and your influence will not lead others down a path that may lead them to sin.”

Friends, can you see the sacrilegious problem created by such advice? Those who make this argument are saying that while Jesus made, drank, and shared intoxicating beverages publicly, we, out of, apparently, a greater concern for our reputation and influence than Jesus had for his, need to drink privately. Pause a moment and take that in. Does this argument not call us to ignore the example of Jesus and do better than he did? Does this argument not imply that when we drink privately at home, we are exhibiting greater concern for our reputations and the lost than Jesus did? Does this argument not imply that while Jesus behaved a certain way, we need to ignore his example and do better than he, himself, did? Such is irreverent folly!

Conclusion

At the heart of Christian ethics lies the call to holiness. Holiness is a comprehensive orientation of life that seeks to honor and glorify God. Paul affirmed that it involves presenting our bodies as living, holy sacrifices that are acceptable to God and to resist conformity to the world (Rm. 12:1–2). Holiness includes intentional choices that shape desires and habits in ways that reflect God’s ownership and purpose over our lives.

Within this framework, abstinence from alcohol is a display of holiness, rather than a mere denial of enjoyment. Alcohol is a substance that is associated with the alteration of perception, inhibition, and judgment. Even when consumed in moderation, it diminishes control rather than enhancing it. In contrast, God values sobriety (1 Thes. 5:6; 1 Pet. 5:8), watchfulness (2 Tim. 4:5; Col. 4:2), and self-discipline (1 Pet. 4:7; 1 Cor. 6:12).

The repeated exhortations to be sober-minded underscore a moral vision in which clarity of mind, vigilance, and readiness for service are representative qualities of a child of God. The practice of abstinence from intoxicating beverages aligns perfectly with these qualities:

- Abstinence from alcohol is really an affirmation of our priorities. Scripture repeatedly calls God’s people to live with spiritual clarity, disciplined self-control, and reverent caution in a world filled with snares.
- Abstinence from alcohol is a refusal to become a stumbling block to others, and to live in love and wisdom toward others (Rm. 14:13).
- Abstinence from alcohol is a way to honor one’s body as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Abstinence from alcohol is not about legalism, but about embracing wisdom. It is a choice shaped by our reverence for God’s warnings (Heb. 2:1–3), compassion for human frailty (Rm. 15:1), and a desire to walk circumspectly (Eph. 5:15) before both God and our fellow man.

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THE EXAMPLE PRINCIPLE: NOT CAUSING OTHERS TO STUMBLE

Luke Griffin and David Sproule

Luke Griffin: Executive Director of House to House/Heart to Heart and elder at the East Ridge congregation.

David Sproule: Preaches for the Palm Beach Lakes church of Christ in West Palm Beach, Florida.



The subject of beverage alcohol is a perennial topic among brethren. Some speak of “moderation” as though it were a safe and simple boundary. Others insist that drinking is inherently sinful.

We (the authors) believe that drinking alcoholic beverages is sinful. Drunkenness is clearly condemned (Rm. 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:9–10), and alcohol is so closely tied to drunkenness that one cannot safely determine the point at which he becomes drunk (Eph. 5:18). Impairment can occur before one recognizes it because “drunk” is not an obvious line that one can measure in the moment. The only sure way to “be not drunk with wine” is to refrain from the practice that produces drunkenness.

While there is basically universal agreement that drunkenness is sinful (Gal. 5:19–21), some brethren argue for drinking socially, moderately, or in the privacy of the home. Various efforts are made to justify a child of God “having a drink or two.” One such effort involves Romans 14:21: “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink

wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.” While it is a stretch to say this authorizes drinking, some argue this teaches that drinking is a matter of opinion and can be practiced if others do not know it.

The Bible Context: Wine Is a Mocker

No Scripture will ever contradict another Bible passage, and no Scripture should be used to draw a conclusion that violates the fullness of biblical truth. This is true on the subject of alcohol and Romans 14:21. Consider some truths made abundantly clear in Scripture.

The word “wine” can mean fermented or unfermented beverage. This statement bothers many pro-drink advocates, but it is inescapable. While the English word refers to an intoxicating beverage, the Greek term *oinos* can refer to juice from the grape in any form—intoxicating or non-intoxicating—and is determined by the context. Wine is spoken of while it is still in the grapes (Isa. 65:8, LXX), when it is freshly pressed (16:10), and when it is fermented (Eph. 5:18). Since wine in Scripture can refer to an unfermented beverage, how would one prove from the context that Romans 14:21 refers to fermented beverage? Such cannot be done successfully. In fact, in light of full biblical evidence, it is necessary to conclude that it is unfermented.



See Spiritual Sword Online Article:
Allen Webster, "I Only Drink in
Private"
(spiritualsword.com/0002-2).

The Bible gives clear warnings against drinking alcohol. There is nothing ambiguous about Proverbs 20:1: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise" (NKJV). Here, God does not focus on the amount but on the substance itself. Drinking ruins lives; it brings sorrow, strife, pain, confusion, and addiction (Prov. 23:29–35; Isa. 5:11). Drinking lowers one's inhibitions (2 Sam. 11:13), deadens one's judgment (Isa. 28:7–8), weakens one's moral awareness (Gen. 19:30–38), destroys families (Gen. 9:18–27), and impairs one's ability to discern right and wrong (Lev. 10:9–11). Ultimately, it brings God's judgment (Hab. 2:15–16; Isa. 5:11, 22–23). If one objects that wine is spoken of positively in the Old Testament, such "wine" references are to unfermented juice. A simple rule: interpret all neutral/positive references as juice, and all negative references as alcohol to harmonize all Old Testament references.



See Spiritual Sword Online Article:
Dave Miller, "Did the Corinthians
Become Intoxicated?"
(spiritualsword.com/0003-2).

The Bible gives clear prohibitions against drinking alcohol. "Do not get drunk with wine" (Eph. 5:18). The Greek word for "get drunk" (*methusko*) means "to make drunk, or to grow drunk" and is "an inceptive verb, marking the process or the state expressed in [*methuo*, to be drunk], to become intoxicated" (Vine, 180). The term applies even to the first drink, as Young defines it as "to begin to be softened" (275), and A.T. Robertson states that Greek verbs ending in "-sko" are "generally either inchoative or causative" (150). (*Inchoative*: "expressing the beginning of an action"—*Oxford English Dictionary*.) Christians are not of "those who get drunk" (*methusko*)

(1 Thes. 5:5–7; cf. 5:21–22; Rm. 12:9; 1 Pet. 2:11; 4:3–4).

The Bible commands complete sobriety. "Be holy in all your conduct" (1 Pet. 1:15–16). "Do not be conformed to this world" (Rm. 12:2). "Glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (10:31). Twice in 1 Thessalonians 5, Christians are commanded to "be sober" (5:6, 8). The Greek *nepho* means "to be free from the influence of intoxicants" (Vine, 583) and "to be sober, drink no wine" (Liddell, 1175). The Bible uses *sober* to mean total abstinence from alcohol just as Alcoholics Anonymous and the average person does today.

The key to understanding Romans 14 is that whatever it says, it falls within the larger framework of God's Word. Romans 14:21 cannot contradict or nullify what the rest of the Bible teaches about abstaining from alcoholic beverages.

The Book of Romans Context: Make No Provision to the Flesh

The book of Romans must be taken as a whole and interpreted in context. It is easy to pull a verse or a section out of context and twist it to one's destruction (2 Pet. 3:15–17). Throughout Romans, Paul addresses a conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians. He encourages the church to unify.

All sinful behavior has consequences. Paul warns, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against **all** ungodliness" (Rm. 1:18). The word for "ungodliness" means "a lack of reverence for deity" (BDAG, 141), which leads one to disregard and violate his holy will (cf. Jude 1:15). The Lord alone determines right and wrong, even in matters of indifference. If one violates the Bible's teaching on alcohol, what awaits? All will face the righteous judgment of God (Rm.

1:32). All shall stand before the judgment seat and “give account of himself to God” (14:10–12). The one who does “not obey the truth” but “does evil” will receive God’s “indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish” (2:5–9).

All sinful behavior is addictive. Romans 6 uses the word “sin” 17 times and “slaves” nine times. Paul warns of being “slaves of sin” (6:6, 17, 19–20) and presenting “your members as slaves of . . . lawlessness leading to more lawlessness” (6:19). Romans teaches that sin (including alcohol, Eph. 5:18) is addictive—so how could Romans 14:21 give permission to imbibe in a “lawlessness” that can lead “to more lawlessness”?

All sinful behavior must be avoided. Prior to chapter 14, Romans warns of drinking as an element of “darkness.” Romans 13:11–12a warns of “sleep” and “night,” which are associated with getting drunk in 1 Thessalonians 5:4–8. Let us “cast off the works of darkness,” including “rioting and drunkenness” (Rm. 13:12b–13) and “make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (13:14). Is having a drink of alcohol, making “provision for the flesh”? To ask is to answer.

The Verse Context: Unfermented Wine

Some argue that the verse (1) provides liberty to drink alcohol, and (2) directs Christians to forego that liberty if it would cause a brother to stumble. But is *oinos* in this verse intoxicating wine? The answer: It cannot be. Does this verse justify modern-day drinking? The answer: It does not.

Romans 14:21 must be kept within the framework of Romans 14. The verse does not contradict or nullify its immediate context. In Romans 14, Paul starts addressing specific conflicts causing division. He talks about some eating meats while others eat only vegetables. This could be Jewish Christians abstaining from unclean foods,

or Gentile Christians refraining from meat sacrificed to idols (Acts 15:29; Rev. 2:14, 20). Paul talks about holding one day above another (Col. 2:16), as Jewish Christians may have with the Sabbath or Passover or Gentile Christians may have with Roman holidays. This context is key to understanding Romans 14.

The text deals with eating food. “Food” is found three times in the chapter, and “eat(s),” 15 times. It is not until the end of the chapter that Paul brings in “drinking” (14:17, 21). Drinking is not a separate activity from eating here—“your food” (14:15) involves “eating and drinking” (14:17). Eating and drinking (meat and wine) go together.

The text deals with food offered to idols. First Corinthians 8:9–13 is parallel to Romans 14 (see below). The concern is over a particular situation—a “weak” brother being emboldened to violate his conscience to eat “things which are offered to idols” (1 Cor. 8:10). Since eating and drinking are parallel, why would it not follow that the wine had also been offered to idols, and that is what made it a matter of concern? Remember all “wine” in the ancient world was not fermented. Libations in the Roman Empire included at least mixed wine, unmixed wine, honey, oil, water, and milk.

That must be the situation Paul had in mind. Drinking wine was to be avoided for the same reason that eating meat was to be avoided—a weaker brother’s concern about both being offered to idols. Nothing in this text demands the wine was intoxicating, any more than the meat was intoxicating. In fact, considering all biblical evidence (the only way to study the Bible, Psa. 119:160) would forbid the intoxicating wine interpretation.

The text deals with food that is pure in God’s eyes. Paul states, “All things indeed are pure” (14:20). “All things” refers to meats being eaten (see “all things” in 14:2). Jesus declared “all foods clean” (Mk. 7:19);



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thus, no food is “unclean of itself” (Rm. 14:14). The specific context has to do with meats—whether once deemed unclean under Jewish law (Mk. 7:1–23) or seen as unclean due to idol worship (1 Cor. 8:9–13). There is no justification for applying this to alcoholic beverages, for to God, they are a mocker, brawler, and unwise (Prov. 20:1). While one has a God-given right to eat meat (1 Tim. 4:3–5), he has no God-given right to drink alcohol.

***Context and
consistency demand
that the wine in
Romans 14 is not
alcoholic, but a
harmless element like
the food discussed.***

The text deals with matters of indifference. A Christian was at liberty to eat meat or to not eat meat, but he was not to use his liberty to “do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak” (Rm. 14:21). The wine in this verse is parallel to meat—a matter of indifference to God. But it is clear throughout Scripture that God is not indifferent to intoxicating wine. Therefore, the “wine” (*oinos*) in Romans 14:21 must be unfermented. God would *not* give permission in one verse to “drink wine” (so long as it did not violate someone’s conscience), and in other verses warn against drinking wine. The God of truth is always consistent (Num. 23:19; Tit. 1:2; Heb. 13:8). This verse should not be removed from its context to justify “having a drink or two.”

The New Testament Context: Love Over Liberty

Romans 14:21 is in a context of a defense of liberty giving way to love. God was giving

permission to first-century Christians to eat and drink in situations where it would not offend a weaker brother while forbidding them that liberty in situations where it would. This applied equally to flesh, wine, and anything else (Rm. 14:21).

Paul’s primary purpose was to protect brethren from spiritual harm. He warned, “Let us not therefore judge one another anymore: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block or an occasion to fall in his brother’s way” (14:13). His language is strong: “Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died” (14:15). In matters of conscience, Christians have no right to insist on anything if it becomes a cause of stumbling.

R. L. Whiteside emphasized that Paul’s concern is not merely hurting someone’s feelings but creating an “occasion of sin” that impels a soul toward sin (Whiteside, 275–276). He concluded, “No Christian should push his opinions and personal rights to the disturbance of the church” (Whiteside, 275). David Lipscomb (with notes by J. W. Shepherd) noted that Romans 14:21 explicitly includes drinking. He argued that even if a man believes he could drink alcoholic beverages in moderation without sin, “he is under obligation to refrain,” because his example may lead a weaker brother to ruin (Lipscomb, 254).

In the book of 1 Corinthians, Paul also addressed meat offered to idols. Since the whole of the Bible’s teaching on any subject is necessary to understand God’s will, the interpretation of Romans 14 must harmonize with that of 1 Corinthians 8.

Paul’s principle reaches beyond eating and drinking. He explains, “Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth” (1 Cor. 8:1). The question is never only what one knows, but how much he loves. Paul warns, “Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that

are weak” (8:9). When liberty becomes a stumbling block, it is no longer harmless. Wounding a weak conscience is sin against Christ (8:12).

Paul uses the example principle: “Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (8:13). If Paul would relinquish eating meat (an action God allows) permanently to protect a brother, should Christians not relinquish drinking alcohol (an action God forbids) to protect the weak and preserve holiness? Moses E. Lard summarized: “The question is not, what is the nature of the act in itself, but does it injure another?” If it injures another, “we must abstain from it” (427).

Instruction about liberty continues in 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul again teaches that decisions must be governed by edification and salvation, not self. “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not” (10:23). This verse answers the shallow argument, “I have a right.” A right may exist, and yet not be expedient; it may not edify. Paul continues, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God. Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God: even as I please all men in all things, not seeking mine own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved” (10:31–33).

Someone may object that Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 are “not about alcohol.” That is true, but that misses the force of Paul’s teaching. The example principle of Christian love is important in the question of drinking alcohol. Paul used the “eat or drink” language to show the duty of avoiding offense (Lipscomb, 253).

Scripture presses Christians to a higher standard than personal preference: *Will my choice glorify God, protect souls, and build up the church?* It makes us wrestle with

harder questions: *Is this wise? Is it loving? Is it safe for souls?* Drinking alcohol is not merely a private preference. It is a sin—a practice loaded with spiritual dangers, cultural meaning, and serious consequences. It is clearly a stumbling block to self and others. Why would a Christian entangle himself with something that violates God’s law and carries eternal consequences?

The example principle applies here:

- *One drinking alcohol encourages others to drink.* The danger is not only what I do, but what my example encourages others to do. Since drinking is socially normal and morally minimized, a young Christian who sees (or learns of) an older Christian drinking can easily follow his example. “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6).
- *Alcohol wounds consciences.* Romans 14 makes clear that conscience matters. When a Christian acts against his conscience, he sins, because he acts not in faith (14:23). He must also avoid wounding another’s conscience. A Christian must not only ask, “Do I think this is permissible?” but also, “How will this affect the conscience of those who see it, hear about it, learn of it, or are invited into it?”
- *Alcohol damages the unity of the church.* Paul urges peace and edification (14:19). Christians must think beyond themselves and consider whether a practice will unnecessarily divide brethren or weaken their trust in each other. Churches are right now upset over this issue. Scripture’s counsel is not for those against it to remain quiet; Scripture requires that those who are for it give it up for unity’s sake (Psa. 133:1).
- *Alcohol hinders evangelism.* Can one talk of Jesus with a beer in his hand? If he did, does he seriously think a sinner would respect him and listen? The answer is no. Paul’s pattern is consistent. In matters of liberty, always choose the path that best advances the gospel

and saves souls (1 Cor. 9:12). Abstaining from alcohol strengthens influence, avoids confusion, protects the weak, and promotes peace.

How should the example principle guide us regarding alcohol consumption?

First, we must acknowledge the obligation, not merely the option, of restraint. If an action might be a stumbling block, then love requires abstinence from it. Paul calls it “evil” to exercise liberty “with offence” (Rm. 14:20). He did not say to drink carefully or privately (1 Cor. 8:13). Since wounding a weak conscience is a sin against Christ (8:12), it is not a minor issue.

Second, we must define maturity. Today, “maturity” can mean, “I am old enough to drink.” In Scripture, it means, “I am willing to surrender what I must for the sake of others.” Even if drinking were a matter of liberty (and it is incredulous to say that a drinking Christian is the strong brother of Romans 14), Scripture would still demand abstinence.

Third, we must not despise others (Rm. 14:3). It is unloving to tease, mock, or injure another. It is right to pray for, teach, and be patient with others. Seek the course that edifies.

Fourth, we must set a good example. A Christian always considers who is watching (Mt. 5:14–16). This is not hypocrisy; it is responsibility. Paul’s entire argument rests upon the principle that our actions teach and influence others. If a Christian posts images of alcohol on social media (or even the appearance of drinking such as mocktails or virgin drinks), he is setting a terrible example to people he may never meet face-to-face.

Fifth, we must not test edges. Some people treat liberty as a fence to reach over. They see how close they can get to danger without “technically” sinning. “How much can I get away with and still go to heaven?” Paul is not interested in pushing boundaries; he argues for the sure and safe way.

Conclusion: The Way of Christ Is the Way of Sacrifice

Romans 14 does not sanction drinking; it forbids harming a brother in matters God allows. Since God nowhere allows drinking intoxicants—and everywhere warns against it—there is no liberty here to assert. The whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) requires an unavoidable conclusion: holiness demands abstinence from drinking alcohol.

But the heart of this issue is not alcohol; it is the heart. Will I insist on my preferences, or will I imitate Christ in self-denial? A Christian may be right about facts and be wrong in love. Liberty becomes sin when it harms a brother. A mature disciple is willing to lay aside a lawful thing to prevent another’s stumbling. A mature disciple never even considers an unlawful thing.

Let us follow this rule: “Follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Rm. 14:19). Let us heed this warning: “Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to them that are weak” (1 Cor. 8:9). Let us embrace Paul’s example: “If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world stands” (8:13).

In a culture that celebrates self-indulgence, the church must display a better way. Liberty must yield to love, and love must surrender rights for others.

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ALCOHOL AND THE CHRISTIAN'S INFLUENCE

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The Power of Influence

One of the great principles of the Christian faith is that the child of God must be mindful of the example he sets before others and

the influence his words, actions, and attitudes have on others. Our Savior said, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt. 18:6). Paul wrote, "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification" (Rm. 15:2).

Surely all Christians are aware of Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it [the earth, hf] be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men" (Mt. 5:13). He declared of his followers: "You are the light of the world" (5:14). Paul affirmed of the Corinthian Christians (and applicable to all Christians):

"You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men" (2 Cor. 3:2). In the light of these sober warnings and pointed affirmations, what kind of message does a Christian send to non-Christians and weak Christians when he/she engages in the drinking of alcoholic beverages? Imagine inviting someone to your home for a Bible study and serving alcoholic drinks! What would be the chances of converting that person to a pure and holy life by such actions?

I am friends with a retired Baptist preacher. We both reside in the same Senior Living Community and eat breakfast together every morning. He is strongly opposed to drinking alcoholic beverages to any degree. Suppose I invited him to my apartment and had a can of beer or a glass of wine on the table. Suppose I offered him one or the other? What do you think my chances would be of converting him to the New Testament way?

Alcohol and the Works of the Flesh

Drunkenness is a work of the flesh, and "those who practice such things will not

inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). So serious is the sin of drunkenness that faithful children of God are not to keep company with a brother in Christ who has become a drunkard—“not even to eat with such a person,” i.e., have table fellowship with him (1 Cor. 5:11). The stark reality is that no one ever became a drunkard without taking that first drink and usually engaging in what is infamously called “social drinking.” Why would any Christian want to imperil his own soul by such actions? Why would any Christian want to be a stumbling block to another Christian? Why would a child of God want to engage in an activity that is of such a nature that it would make it virtually impossible for him to lead others to the Lord? Following the baptism of a person into Christ, would anyone suggest that the congregation gather at a local bar and celebrate the person’s new birth with a round of drinks? Likewise, why would Christian parents engage in an activity that has the potential of leading their children into alcoholism?

Following his listing of “the works of the flesh,” Paul went on to discuss “the fruit of the Spirit”—fruit that, among other things, manifests itself in self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). Laying these two lists side by side, where would the drinking of alcohol most logically fall? Would it more likely be found as an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit or as a work of the flesh? God’s people are commanded to “abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thes. 5:22). (Note: The King James Version, as well as a footnote in the New American Standard Bible, says “all appearance of evil.”) Does drinking alcoholic beverages even in moderation have such an appearance? If so, then it is to be abstained from and avoided.

Since self-control is a feature of the fruit of the Spirit, is it not demanded that a Christian exercise self-control and abstain from the drinking of alcoholic beverages altogether? Sometimes a person is heard to say of alcohol, “I can take it or leave it.” Someone observed, “When you hear a person say that you can be assured they are taking it more

than they are leaving it!” For the sake of one’s own soul and his influence on others, why not simply leave it?

Paul wrote, “Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit” (Rm. 8:5). Once again, the Christian who is set on pleasing God should ask himself, “Is the imbibing of alcohol more in line with the carnal things of the flesh or with the spiritual things characteristic of those who have their minds set on pleasing God and being a good example to others?”

Titus was to teach “that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience” (Tit. 2:2). I am aware that the word “sober” in this context is talking about being what we often call “levelheaded,” or sensible, wise, and discerning. But I fail to see how a man can be such if his brain has been adversely affected by taking alcohol even in moderate amounts.

***No Christian can
drink alcohol without
diminishing his
influence and placing
a stumbling block
before others.***

Among the qualifications of a bishop are such traits as “temperate, sober-minded . . . not given (addicted, textual note) to wine . . . have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:2–7). It is for certain that the man who never drinks alcohol will never become addicted to alcohol! It would also be difficult for a man who is a winebibber to maintain a good influence among those outside the church and not “fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”

Alcohol and Worldliness

Worldliness is a tremendous threat to the Christian and his influence. Paul wrote: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable [rational, textual note] service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rm. 12:1–2). I hardly see how a person under alcohol’s influence even to the slightest degree could render reasonable, rational service to God and show by his life what is the “good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

James warned, “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4). John wrote, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15–16). Pure religion requires a Christian to “keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Jas. 1:27). The consumption of alcohol clearly aligns itself on the side of the world and its lusts rather than on the side of the Father and his will.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus spoke of the one who “received seed among thorns,” and explained that such was the person “who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful” (Mt. 13:22). How often is social drinking associated with “the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches”? The child of God who persists in such conduct will eventually find himself so encrusted in worldly matters that it will be almost impossible to extricate himself from them.

Peter wrote to Christians: “We have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will

of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries” (1 Pet. 4:3). Note that drunkenness and drinking parties are two different things, and both are disapproved. The Christian who participates in drinking parties (social drinking) puts himself in bad company and compromises his otherwise godly influence to such an extent that it will be virtually impossible to lead others to Christ or to strengthen weak Christians in the faith and holy living.

Did Not Jesus Drink Wine?

In defense of Christians consuming alcoholic beverages, it is sometimes argued that Jesus drank alcoholic wine. Where is the verse that so states? Did not Jesus turn water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee? (Jn. 2:1–11). (See Allen Webster’s article, “Did Jesus Turn Water into Alcoholic Wine?”) Did not Paul advise Timothy to “drink a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities”? (1 Tim. 5:23). (See Phil Sanders’ article, “Paul Told Timothy to ‘Use a Little Wine.’”) Careful attention needs to be given to what the Bible actually says about these matters.

Jesus acknowledged that his enemies accused him of being “a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Mt. 11:19). It is true that Jesus was “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” because he knew that “those that are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick,” and he “did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Mt. 9:11–12). But Jesus was not a winebibber any more than he was a glutton! This was a false charge of those seeking to undermine his deity and destroy his influence.

Old Testament Warnings

The Old Testament wisely warns: “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Prov. 20:1). It exhorts, “Do not mix with winebibbers” (23:20). It further warns, “Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles

in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper” (23:31–32). Christ lived and died under the Old Testament law. It is hard to imagine that he did not know about those warnings or that he ignored and violated those Old Testament admonitions concerning the dangers of alcoholic beverages.

Jesus “committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth” (1 Pet. 2:22). We are to “follow His steps” (2:21). Jesus did not lead sinners to repentance by engaging with them in their sins! We, too, are to learn from the Old Testament (Rm. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). The danger of drinking intoxicating beverages is as real today as it has always been. Christians are exhorted to “not be drunk with wine in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). As the late Gus Nichols noted, “We are to be filled with the Spirit, not with spirits” [intoxicating beverages].

Concluding Observations

A gospel preacher (at least in name) frequented bars and drank intoxicating drinks. He had been divorced twice and lived alone with his cat. He frequently posted pictures on Facebook of his evening meal at home, including pictures of what he referred to as “a tasty beverage” accompanying his meal. I wonder how many sinners, including social drinkers and drunkards, he converted by his

actions! The last I knew, he was no longer in the employ of a congregation of the saints as a preacher.

The imbibing of alcohol has a sad history. The highway carnage, shattered lives, wrecked homes, traumatized children, ruined mental and physical health, murders, and the eternally lost souls who will be weeping and gnashing their teeth in an everlasting hell should be more than enough to keep the thinking person from ever taking that first drink leading down this well-proven path of destruction. It should be more than enough to cause those who have started down such a path to stop before it is eternally too late because, indeed, “at the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper” (Prov. 23:32).

I earnestly appeal to all preachers, elders, deacons, Bible school teachers, and all members of the precious body of Christ, please do not compromise and diminish your influence by the drinking of alcoholic beverages to any extent. Doing so is a great hindrance to converting people to Christ and to keeping unspotted from the world; to say nothing of the eternal peril it brings to one’s own soul.

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Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.

PROVERBS 20:1

DID JESUS TURN WATER INTO ALCOHOLIC WINE?

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Jesus' first miracle was performed in a back-water place, among common folk, at a simple wedding in little Cana of Galilee (John 2:1–11). Simply and silently, water became wine.

A question persists millennia later: Did Jesus create alcoholic wine?

The answer matters, not merely for Christian behavior, but for Christology. What we conclude about the nature of that wine reflects what we believe about the nature of Christ.

The Historical Context: A Wedding—Not a Tavern

Weddings in first-century Palestine were community celebrations that lasted for days (Mt. 25:1–12). Since hospitality was regarded as a sacred duty (Gen. 18:1–8; 19:1–8; Job 31:32; Heb. 13:2), to run out of provisions at a wedding feast was embarrassing to a host (cf. Prov. 27:14; Ecc. 10:19). So, when the wine failed, Jesus solved a big problem in an amazing way.

The Purpose of the Miracle. As the first of John's seven miraculous signs to prove that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God (Jn. 20:30–31), it “manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him” (2:11). It revealed creative power—the same power that made grapes

and vines now made juice without either. It demonstrated his authority over nature.

The Quantity. Jesus filled six waterpots—holding “two or three firkins (*metretēs*) apiece”—with wine (2:6). Since a *metretēs* was 8.5–9 U.S. gallons, the total volume would have been 120–180 gallons. On one hand, the large amount underscores abundance and generosity. It reflects messianic imagery—joy, blessing, fulfillment (Amos 9:13). On the other, this helps with interpretation. Alcoholic potency in this quantity would be irresponsible even by worldly standards. Would the sinless Son of God provide 150 gallons of intoxicating beverages to people who had already been drinking freely? Excavations at Khirbet Qana (Cana) suggest it was a small village at that time whose entire population was between 200–400 inhabitants (some say as few as 100). So, in effect, one is accusing Jesus of giving a gallon of alcohol to every adult in the village. Such would diminish, not manifest, his glory.

The Quality. The governor declared it “good wine” and noted that it was unusual to save the best for last (2:10). Does “well drunk” mean intoxicated? *Methusthōsin* can mean “drunken” (Mt. 24:49; 1 Cor. 5:11; Rev. 17:6), but often simply means to drink to satisfaction (cf. Septuagint, Ps. 36:8; 65:10; Isa. 34:5). The expression reflects customary banquet language and does not require that guests were intoxicated. If they were drunk, then how could they tell which wine was better?

The Cultural Context: Wine in the Ancient Jewish World

Jewish wedding feasts were gatherings of people devoted to Moses' Law, which condemned drunkenness (Prov. 20:1; 23:29–32). It strains credibility to imagine a devout Jewish celebration descended into intoxication, with the Messiah supplying the means.

The “good wine” at Cana was certainly superior—not in potency and proof, but in purity and freshness (good, *kalos*, can mean excellence in purity, suitability). In ancient times, especially among Jews, the best wine was not necessarily the strongest, but the sweetest. Wine drawn off before pressing (called “free run”) was considered best because it was sweetest. William Patton noted in *Bible Wines* that since the world then had no sugar, people were generally more interested in having “a sweet drink than in alcoholic exhilaration.”

Attributing an intoxicating drink to Jesus misunderstands both the text and the nature of the Savior.

Since fermentation consumes the natural sugar in grape juice, those desiring sweetness sought to limit or prevent it. Without refrigeration or preservatives, they developed practical methods to keep juice unfermented or minimally fermented. The various methods produced wine strengths along a spectrum—from fresh juice to moderately alcoholic (by our standards).

Level 1: Freshly Pressed (new wine/gleukos). In its earliest stage, “wine” is simply sweet juice. If consumed immediately or preserved carefully, it never becomes alcohol. From late July through September (extending into

early October in cooler hill regions), the harvest season in Palestine, Jews had fresh juice (cf. Num. 13:20; Deut. 16:13).

Intoxication Level of Fresh Juice: None

If left unpreserved, unfermented juice would remain sweet (non-alcoholic) only temporarily—from hours to a few days (the warmer the climate, the shorter). In summer months, mild fermentation began within 6 to 24 hours due to airborne yeast and wild yeast present on grape skins. But Jews could have non-alcoholic grape juice year-round. How?

Level 2: Boiling into a Syrup (*sapa* or *defrutum*). The Jews practiced boiling according to the Jewish Mishna (c. AD 200). It was common to boil fresh juice down to a third of its original volume or even down to a paste. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 2:3 says that boiled wine was acceptable to drink among Gentiles (cf. Terumot 11:1; Mishnah Maaser Sheni 2:1).

Boiling wine caused it to thicken since it reduced the water content. By heating fresh juice (called *must*), fermentation was halted (heat destroyed the yeast organisms). The sugar concentration would be increased by volume so the juice would be sweeter. The high sugar content would resist spoilage. (Very high sugar concentrations can create osmotic pressure that stresses/inhibits yeast and slows down fermentation. This is why honey, syrup, and thick concentrates can resist microbial activity.)

The result of boiling fresh juice was a sugar concentration in the form of a thick, sweet concentrate. It was later diluted with water and reconstituted as a non-alcoholic beverage (similar to juice reconstituted from concentrate today) (McGuiggan, 41). Further, alcohol content in fermented wine can be removed by boiling. Alcohol evaporates at lower temperature (173° Fahrenheit/78.3° Celsius) than water (212°/100°).

Intoxication Level of Boiled Grape Juice (*Sapa/Defrutum*): None

Level 3: Sealed and Kept in Cool Storage. Fresh juice was sometimes stored in tightly sealed containers to limit air exposure. Columella, a Roman agricultural writer, described storing fresh *must* in amphorae (two-handled, pointed-bottom clay jars) which were coated with pitch or resin.

Restricting oxygen contact slowed both spoilage and fermentation. In some cases, these containers were submerged in cool water, buried, or stored in cellars or caves to maintain lower temperatures. Juice could be kept fresh under cold water for about a year (Adams and Stamps). The Roman statesman, Cato, said: “If you wish to have must [grape juice] all year, put grape juice in an amphora and seal the cork with pitch; sink it in a fishpond. After thirty days take it out. It will be grape juice for a whole year” (De Agri Cultura CXX).

If fresh juice was not boiled but was sealed immediately and stored in a cool environment, fermentation was greatly slowed but not prevented. Eventually, it would ferment and the resulting strength depended on temperature, yeast presence, sugar content, and oxygen exposure. Such wine could eventually reach 8–11 percent ABV. If diluted, alcohol was reduced to 0.05 to 3 percent. If juice was boiled into *sapa* and then stored, the alcohol level was zero percent, and it remained non-alcoholic when extracted.

Intoxication Level of Sealed/Stored Wine: None to Moderate

Level 4: Strained or filtered wine. Classical writers demonstrate a desire for less potent wine even among Greeks and Romans. Pliny the Elder referred to wine whose “strength has been broken by the filter” (*viribus fractis per colum*). Plutarch discussed wine being

diluted so as not to inflame the passions at banquets. Even Horace spoke of wines that were tamed or mellowed. Repeated filtration did not eliminate fermentation, but it lowered potency by removing impurities and reducing yeast and sediment. Compared to modern alcohol, the result was a “light wine,” weaker than today’s table wine.

Intoxication Level of Filtered Wine: Reduced

Level 5: Diluted with water. Wine in the ancient Mediterranean world was commonly mixed with water before drinking. Undiluted wine was often considered barbaric. While dilution did not remove all alcohol, it significantly moderated its intoxicating effect. The ratios generally were 3:1, 4:1, but went up to 20:1. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (vol. 2) says, “A single drink in the U.S. is not the same as wine in the first century that could be watered as much as 1 part alcohol to 20 parts water” (Elwell and Beitzel, 2147).

A 12 percent wine (their strongest)¹ diluted 20:1 was the equivalent of non-alcoholic beer today (0.48 ABV); a 3:1 dilution became roughly 3 percent alcohol; a 4:1 dilution was 2–2.5 percent. A standard glass of wine in the U.S. would be four to five times that concentration.² A 180-pound man drinking three percent wine would have to drink five pints (80 ounces/2.3 liters) to reach a blood alcohol content of .08 (legal limit in 49 states). Drinking two percent requires six pints (96 ounces/3 liters), and these would have to be consumed within two hours on an empty stomach. The social setting of a Jewish wedding—extending over days—would typically involve gradual consumption, not rapid intake, with food. This does **not** mean that some diluted wine was incapable of causing drunkenness, but it shows the required volume was substantial, would necessitate continuous drinking, and would demonstrate deliberate excess. And the likelihood is they used unfermented drinks or diluted more.

¹ Wine in the first century would be fermented by strains of wild yeasts and could at times reach concentrations of 11–12%. (<https://cfc.sebts.edu/faith-and-culture/was-new-testament-wine-alcoholic/>)

² <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/standard-drink-sizes/index.html>



See Spiritual Sword Online Article for further discussion of dilution: Allen Webster, "I Only Drink in Private" (spiritualsword.com/0002-2).

Intoxication Level of Diluted Wine: Significantly Lowered

Level 6: Naturally Fermented Ancient Wine (undiluted). Even when fully fermented, and undiluted, ancient wine did not reach modern alcohol potency levels for several reasons:

- Natural yeasts die off at around 9–11 percent alcohol levels. If the alcoholic content is much above 10 percent, yeast cells are killed and fermentation ceases. So, ancient wines topped out at about 7–10 percent.
- Sugar levels in ancient grapes were generally lower than modern cultivated varieties. As a rule of thumb, the percentage of alcohol will be half of the percentage of the sugar in the juice.
- Today's wine is often engineered for maximum fermentation.
- No distillation technology existed to produce stronger beverages—whiskey, vodka, rum. The alembic still, which separates alcohol from wine, was perfected by Persian alchemist Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan around 800 A.D. ("Alcohol" is an Arabic word.) It spread to Europe around 1200.

So, a comparison of ancient wine with today's alcohol reveals the following:

- Strongest: Ancient, fermented wine: 8–11 percent; today, distilled liquor 35–50 percent.
- Common: Diluted wine: 2–4 percent; today, table wine: 12–15 percent; port or sherry: 18–20 percent.

Thus, when Scripture warns against intoxication (Eph. 5:18), it addresses a sin that was far less than its modern counterpart.

Intoxication Level of Ancient Wine: Moderate (limited by ancient methods)

No one disputes that Israel, Rome, or Greece had wine that contained alcohol but to say that ancient people **had** to drink wine is false. These practices show that ancient people understood fermentation and took measures either to encourage it or to restrain it. Sweetness was valued by many; intoxication was desired by others. They had the means to preserve juice instead of having to drink fermented wine.

Even if some Jews did drink light wine, it cannot be proven that Jesus or the early church did. Jewish practice is not Christian law. The Jews did many things, such as divorce, Corban, and buying/selling in the temple, that were outside the will of God. The only authority in the church is Scripture (Col. 3:17), so one would need a verse that proves Jesus, the apostles, or the early church drank *fermented* wine in order to have divine permission today. It is interesting that the traveling companion of Paul had to be coached to use wine *for medicine* (or to make his drinking water healthy, 1 Timothy 5:23). Where did he get the idea that he should be so strict?

The Linguistic Context: The Spirit's Words in Two Languages

There are thirteen words translated by wine or strong drink in the Bible, *yayin* (Hebrew) and *oinos* (Greek) being the primary words. Some who defend moderate drinking default to the assumption that every instance of *yayin* or *oinos* was alcoholic. This is simply not the case. Fresh-pressed wine, new wine, and boiled wine, for instance, were free from any intoxicating effects (Luke 5:37–39).

Bible words must be defined by context, usage, and scholarship, while avoiding applying modern definitions to first-century contexts. The two-view *oinos* interpretation is sometimes disparaged as being of modern origination,¹

¹ Intellectual honesty requires not allowing preferences to reject scholarship, as the Jehovah's Witnesses do in John 1:1, Calvinists do in restricting *sarx* beyond its lexical range, denominational debaters do by redefining

but it holds up biblically and lexically (going back even before the time of Christ).



See Spiritual Sword Online Article:
Dave Miller, “Lexical Study on Wine
in Both Testaments”
(spiritualsword.com/0005-2).

Many words have different meanings in different contexts. The word “work,” for instance, can mean meritorious works or works of obedience, depending on the context (Eph. 2:9; Jas. 4). The same is true with *oinos*.

Yayin (Hebrew). The most common Old Testament word for wine is *yayin* (יַיִן) (used 141 times). According to a Hebrew and English Lexicon, *yayin* denotes “wine” in a broad sense—either fermented or the fruit of the vine. Gleason Archer notes that the word “does not specify whether the juice had undergone fermentation or not.” The context determines which is in view. In Genesis 9:21, Proverbs 20:1, and Proverbs 23:31, *yayin* refers to fermented drink. In other passages it is used of fresh juice (Gen. 27:28, 37; 40:11; Num. 18:12; Prov. 3:10).

Oinos (Greek). The New Testament equivalent is οἶνος, which occurs 34 times, including in John 2. Many standard Greek lexicons define *oinos* as “wine” without specifying fermentation. In Ephesians 5:18, the phrase, “Be not drunk with wine” obviously refers to alcoholic wine, but in Revelation 19:13–15 (Christ treading the winepress), it refers to juice. The Septuagint uses *oinos* to translate *yayin* over 30 times. Norman Geisler observes, “Neither the Hebrew nor the Greek word for wine necessarily implies fermentation.”

Gleukos (Greek). This word occurs once in the New Testament (Acts 2:13). Classical Greek usage describes γλεῦκος (from which we get “glucose”) as freshly pressed grape juice—sweet, not aged. The term was used on Pentecost in mockery (cf. Peter’s denial, 2:15).

Oxos (Greek). This word appears six times in five verses, in connection with the crucifixion. It was low grade sour wine used by soldiers and laborers (not standard table wine). It was vinegar that had gone through a similar fermentation process (Mt. 27:34; Mk. 15:23).

Sikera (Greek)/*Shekar* (Hebrew). The term σίκερα is translated “strong drink” and corresponds to the Hebrew *shekar* (שֶׁכָר), an intoxicating beverage made from grain, dates, or other substances. Generally, the word refers to intoxicating beverages but it seems that it is used sometimes related to its base (dates, not grapes) and not its potency (cf. Deut. 14:26). *Shekar* is found 23 times in the Old Testament and is frequently paired with *yayin* (e.g., Lev. 10:9; Num. 6:3; Prov. 20:1; Isa. 5:11). John the Baptist was to drink “neither wine (*oinos*) nor strong drink (*sikera*)” (Lk. 1:15, only time *sikera* is found in the New Testament). The pairing reflects established vocabulary distinctions in Jewish usage.

Thus, Scripture possesses precise terminology to communicate the subject accurately. Therefore, *oinos* in John 2 does not require the conclusion that Jesus created alcohol.

The Moral Context: The Spotless Character of Christ

This is the most serious part of this study. To say that Jesus made, distributed, and drank alcohol insults the holiness of the Holy One. The question is not merely historical—it is theological; it is practical. Any interpretation of John 2 must harmonize with the holy character of Christ and the consistent biblical warnings against alcohol.

Jesus is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26). He set the bar the highest it has ever been set. Being harmless, he never encouraged excess, enabled vice, or allowed his example to contradict the moral tenor of the law. To suggest that

psallo contrary to historical usage.

he miraculously produced gallons of intoxicants contradicts the concept of “harmless.”

Consider some facts and related questions:

- Jesus sharpened blurred ethical lines in the Law and called out those who cut corners (Mt. 23:1–23; Heb. 5:12–14). Since Moses’ Law condemned alcohol as a source of deception and ruin (Prov. 20:1; 31:4–5; Hab. 2:15), would he participate in a feast with drinking—yea, become the host of it?
- Jesus came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10). Would he begin his ministry by clouding sinners’ judgment or weakening their restraint?
- Would he teach followers to pray, “Lead us not into temptation” (Mt. 6:13), and then supply the very thing that dulls moral awareness and inflames temptation?
- Would he provide abundant alcohol in his ministry and then condemn drunkenness in his gospel? (Eph. 5:18).
- Would he send people home drunk from a wedding and then forbid Christians to cause others to stumble? (Rm. 14:21).
- Would he attend a drinking party and then forbid his followers to attend drinking parties? (Gal. 5:20–21; 1 Pet. 4:1–3). Can we not walk in his steps? (1 Pet. 2:21).
- Would he forbid his followers from harming their bodies (Acts 16:28; 1 Cor. 6:19–20) and then give a substance that killed the brain cells of his friends and disciples?
- Would he demand soberness of Christians (1 Pet. 4:7; 5:8) and then pour drinks that cause loss of control?
- Would he put poison in the bodies he would soon buy with his blood? (1 Cor. 6:19–20). (Ethyl alcohol is toxic, even fatal, unless sufficiently diluted.)
- Would he help people yield the members of their bodies as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin? (Rm. 6:13).
- Would Jesus plant a tree with poison fruit? Even those who are pro-alcohol admit a massive number of innocent people have their lives destroyed by

those who consume alcohol. We can know a tree by its “fruits” (Mt. 7:15).

- Would he give the devil an advantage over his disciples? (Eph. 4:27).

Could you see the Son of God walking into a bar and announcing, “The next round of drinks is on me”? Such a blasphemous thought is far less than teaching he turned alcohol into wine.

To argue, “Jesus drank alcohol because Matthew 11:19 says he came ‘eating and drinking’” (cf. Lk. 7:34), is shallow and solipsistic. The same context has John accused of being demon-possessed. Was he? Jesus’ enemies accused him of being demon-possessed, too (Jn. 7:20; 8:48, 52; 10:20). Was he? They accused Jesus of violating Sabbath laws (Mt. 12:2; Mk. 2:24; Jn. 5:16–18; 9:16); does this mean that he disrespected the law? They accused him of blasphemy (Mt. 9:3; 26:65; Mk. 2:7; Jn. 10:33); did he speak flippantly of God?

Christ’s enemies labeled him a “winebibber” (Lk. 7:34), but we must not join them. His miracle manifested glory, not indulgence; abundance, not intoxication; purity, not corruption. The “good wine” Jesus gives is not found in a bottle but in grace and truth (Jn. 10:10).

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PAUL TOLD TIMOTHY TO “USE A LITTLE WINE”

Is This Permission to Social Drink or Self-medicate?

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“No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities” (1 Tim. 5:23). This passage shows Paul’s concern for his beloved son in the faith’s

health issues (1 Tim. 1:2). No one should imagine Paul is urging Timothy to use an alcoholic beverage for social drinking or intoxication.

The Context

Timothy was deeply devoted to the cause of Christ. He was well aware of the problems of wine and drunkenness. Paul had just told Timothy to “keep yourself pure” (1 Tim. 5:22). Paul warned Timothy to keep himself free from doing immoral things. Paul had just informed him that elders and deacons were not to be “given to wine” (3:3, 8).

Timothy knew what Paul had written earlier—Romans 14:21, for instance: “It is good

neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.” Timothy wanted to set a godly example in front of others. He enjoyed Paul’s trust, and Paul said about him, “I have no one like-minded, who will sincerely care for your state” (Phil. 2:20). He exercised himself toward godliness, knowing that “godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come” (1 Tim. 4:7–8). Timothy took Paul’s advice to be an example of a believer in his conduct and purity (4:12).

Taking these admonitions to heart led Timothy to be a total abstainer from any wine, even if it injured his health. Timothy “must have been a remarkably temperate youth to have required the authority of an apostle to induce him to drink even a little wine. There are few young men so temperate” (Barnes, 186). Timothy’s custom of drinking water only came from a heart devoted to what he thought helped the kingdom of God the most.

Timothy needed wine as medicine for a good reason. The word “infirmities” referred to weaknesses or sicknesses. Timothy had some attacks of sickness which limited his ability to work effectively. Today, there are valuable medicines with alcoholic content used for health reasons. Some cold medicines contain alcohol to help one sleep because sleep is needed to heal. Surgeons use anesthesia to keep a patient from having to suffer severe pain. Such medicines provide a welcome benefit for health’s sake. Such temporary and measured medicinal uses of alcohol or drugs should not be put in the same category as the carousing practices of those given to alcohol and other drugs.

The Problem of Bad Water

Some scholars have suggested that Timothy’s devotion to godliness led him to be a water-only drinker. Timothy may well

have been in danger of taking Paul’s advice to keep himself pure, along with the earlier admonition that overseers and deacons should not abuse wine, as support for his practice of drinking only water.

Timothy, well aware of the troubles of alcohol, avoided wine so he would not place himself in harm’s way. Wanting to avoid unfair criticism (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1–5), Timothy seems to have put his body at risk by drinking unhealthy water. Paul was concerned that Timothy not only keep himself pure; he also wanted Timothy to keep himself fit.

The drinking water in the ancient world was not as clean or as pure as one finds in the modern world. It was often polluted and carried many diseases (MacArthur). B.W. Johnson described getting sick from drinking the water in Ephesus as a “fearfully sick day that passed at Ephesus in 1889, due to the water.” Apparently, Paul had learned Timothy’s water-only custom was causing frequent infirmities to his stomach. Paul’s compassion for his beloved son in the faith led to prescribing something that would help him physically as well as spiritually.

What this stomach ailment was cannot be determined; what is certain is that it is related to water consumption, with water either causing the sickness or making it worse:

Pure and germ-free drinking water is of course a modern phenomenon and perhaps unknown during the time of the writing of the Pastoral Letters. Since water is related to Timothy’s stomach ailment, he is admonished to no longer drink just water, but water mixed with a little wine, and that he should implement this practice immediately (Stott, 141).

Mixing **wine** with **water** was the common method of drinking **wine** in the East in ancient times.

Mixing **water** with **wine** was the common method of drinking **water** in the East in ancient times. (Read those two sentences carefully—they have different meanings.) A small amount of wine added to water acted as a purifying agent. Paul, hence, was advising Timothy to purify the water with “only the smallest percentage of alcohol. The prescription is not of a beverage, but of a remedy for an invalid” (Johnson, op. cit.; 1 Tim. 5:23).

Wine was widely recognized in the ancient world as having medicinal properties. It was, in fact, recognized at that time that wine was effective as an antidote to the effects of impure water (Stott, 141). Medical authorities prescribed wine as a tonic, especially in relation to indigestion. “Drinking wine helped prevent stomach ailments caused by parasites and other contaminants” (Cabal, 1805). Paul did not regard Timothy’s using a little wine as medicine to maintain his health as a moral issue. He would have been disappointed if Timothy had rejected his advice and continued in frequent infirmities.

Take note that it is a “little wine” Paul prescribes here; Paul would never have wanted Timothy to be “given to much wine” (1 Tim. 3:8). Timothy would only have used as much wine as was needed for the health of his body. The little amount of wine sufficient to rid water of germs and bad bacteria would not have been enough to intoxicate. It is God’s will that Christians take care of their bodies. The improper use of wine, rather than help, can easily cause one to be enslaved to alcohol, which can greatly harm one’s body, mind, and soul. A “little wine” must be used by Timothy as a medicinal help, not a hindrance to his service in the cause of Christ. He could maintain purity while taking a little medicine.

Alternatives to Alcohol

Wine is not needed today like it was in the East in ancient times. Should one wish to

purify water, many alternatives exist for us today that were not present in the world of the first century. Thankfully, many people today have fresh, clean water to drink from the tap. Many consumers are able to place filters on their faucets or filter the water dispensed at their refrigerators. Campers can even purchase water filtration devices to purify the water they find outdoors in rivers, streams, and lakes. Since there are so many options available today to purify water that do not involve wine, a person can live a long healthy life and never see the need to use a little wine to purify the water he drinks.

To turn Paul’s medical advice into a license for drinking misuses Scripture.

For those who wish to hydrate their bodies, numerous alternatives are available. Bottled spring water is widely available. Should one wish to have a recreational beverage, one may find a wide variety of non-alcoholic beverages available in any grocery, convenience store, or restaurant. Because of stringent state regulations on food and beverages, one cannot point today to the need for drinking wine “for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.”

Misuse of Scripture

Worldly Christians have frequently cited 1 Timothy 5:23 to support their desire to drink alcohol, but this verse by no means approves social drinking or drunkenness. The “little” wine Paul prescribed for Timothy’s stomach was medicine, not a social beverage. The customary use of wine can easily lead to addiction or enslavement to a drug that will create untold heartache and sin. This passage should never be used to contradict biblical warnings about the danger of alcoholic beverages (Prov. 20:1; 23:29–35; 31:4–5).

We must never make a passage say more than it was meant to say. Paul's prescription to Timothy was personal and specific. To attempt to make this passage justify behavior that is immoral is deceptive and treacherous to Scripture. To suggest that this passage permits any other kind of use of alcohol is craftiness or adulterating the word of God (2 Cor. 4:2). Albert Barnes noted about the reference to wine in this passage:

It was not as a common drink, but the exhortation or command extends only to its use as a medicine. All the use which can be legitimately made of this injunction—whatever conclusion may be drawn from other precepts—is, that it is proper to use a small quantity of wine for medicinal purposes (187).

Paul said, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Cor. 6:12). The proper, medicinal use of a "little wine" is one thing, but social drinking or drunkenness is another. Since alcohol use is notorious for addiction and drunkenness that causes dissipation (Eph. 5:18), the Christian must not use this passage to approve drinking wine for pleasure.

Dissipation is a behavior that "shows lack of concern or thought for the consequences of an action" (Louw and Nida, I.752). An intoxicated person has often committed crimes, spoken rashly, gotten into fights, and caused harm to others. Alcoholics have often spent large amounts of money to feed their addiction and failed to feed their families. The abuse of alcohol has caused many to abuse their loved ones physically, an act they never would have committed when they were sober. Addiction to alcohol has often caused bankruptcy and divorce. Drunkenness changes the heart, making a person feel free to do whatever one desires. Paul could never have made such an ungodly and impure suggestion to Timothy.

There are many reasons that employers, authorities, and insurance companies ask if an applicant uses wine. The one who abstains from wine is often healthier as well as a better candidate than the one who drinks wine. The non-drinker of alcohol will be more sober-minded than a person who sneaks a drink on the job. The non-drinker will never suffer a hangover. The non-drinker will be less likely to speak or act rashly than the intoxicated person. In our culture, one can live an entire lifetime and never touch an alcoholic beverage for social reasons—much less get drunk.

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TEACHING OUR YOUTH ABOUT THE DANGERS OF ALCOHOL

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In a sense, it is easy to write about this topic for at least four reasons: First, even secular society recognizes the dangers of alcohol and has published much on the subject. This includes a wealth of literature focused on teaching young people about the problems associated with alcohol, as well as social programs designed to prevent “substance use disorder” (e.g., “Substance Use Disorder Prevention . . .”).

Second, alcohol is well known as a leading killer (indirectly and directly) of teenagers, factoring into the three leading causes of teenage death: accidents, homicides, and suicides (“Alcohol”).

Third, there are obvious health benefits associated with abstinence. For example, Will Cole is a top functional and integrative doctor and a *New York Times* bestselling author who is also an advocate for total abstinence from alcohol (“About Dr. Will Cole,” Cole, 1). He has pointed out that the moment alcohol enters one’s system, the body begins converting it to acetaldehyde, which is highly toxic and inflammatory. It creates free radical damage, depletes glutathione (the body’s “master antioxidant”), disrupts blood sugar regulation, impacts hormone processing, and alters neurotransmitter function (Cole, 2). Alcohol’s effects on gut health persist long after the last drink, disrupting the crucial communication between gut and brain,

and affecting everything from mood to appetite regulation (Cole, 3).

Fourth, everybody seems to have a personal anecdote about the harms of alcohol. Even the comedic storyteller Garrison Keillor noted that when he stopped drinking, he got about half his life back (“Garrison Keillor”).

*The home is the first
line of defense—if
we love our children,
we will teach them
early, often, and
clearly about the
dangers of alcohol.*

We do not want our children to lose any part of their lives (or their everlasting souls!) to the drink, or to the approval of sin in the lives of others (Rm. 1:32; Eph. 5:11). If even secular society recognizes and strategizes about how to keep children safe from alcohol, then surely those submitting to biblical teaching on the subject should be prepared to think alongside their children about it.

Youth Is a Time of Particular Temptation with Substances

It is no accident that the words of warnings against alcohol in Proverbs 23:29–35 are addressed by a father to his son (23:26). If we love our children, then we will teach them

about the dangers of alcohol. We are not prudish or traditionalistic for addressing the matter, for it is not a minor moral and physical danger. Adolescents are less inhibited about engaging in risky, compulsive behavior (Hammond, et al.). They are also more susceptible to peer pressure than those in other age groups (Steinberg and Monahan). Typically, adolescents “seek diversion, new experiences, and strong emotions” (Konrad, et al.). Young people are subject to high peer pressure, increased independence or the desire for it, and stress (“Get the Facts about Underage Drinking”). This is often a perfect storm for teenagers to embrace experimentation with and addiction to substances. Neural imaging shows that adolescence is a period when reward-seeking is strong, but self-control is still developing, and young people lack experience with “novel adult behavior” (Romer). “[T]he prevalence of alcohol . . . and other drug use increases rapidly from early to late adolescence, peaks during the transition to young adulthood, and declines through the remainder of adulthood” (Griffin and Botvin).

The consequences in the short- and long-term are tragic: “Kids who drink are more likely to be victims of violent crime, to be involved in alcohol-related traffic crashes, and to have serious school-related problems” (“Make a Difference . . .”). Further, “There is accumulating evidence showing that the initiation of substance use early in life contributes to higher levels of use and abuse later in life” (*ibid.*). This is not to mention the spiritual distancing from God caused by the sin of drinking or the associated influences of friends who would tempt a young person to drink.

Parental Guidance

The most effective programs for preventing youth alcoholism have targeted both individuals and families (Griffin and Botvin). This is no surprise because the biblical principle of subsidiarity dictates that morality is always inculcated in the home first. (The

principle of subsidiarity suggests that matters should be handled by the smallest or least centralized competent authority [e.g., Bosnich].) Parents have a special responsibility for their children beyond that of government, church, or society (Eph. 6:1–4). Notice the words of Deuteronomy 6:6–7: “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.” It is critical to talk with children about alcohol long before they are exposed to the temptation to drink. In fact, “It’s never too early” (“Make a Difference . . .”).

We cannot rely on the media, friends, or parents of other children to provide a scientifically accurate and biblically faithful message about alcohol. A quick internet search reveals a variety of television shows that normalize parents guiding their children into alcohol use. A 2016 RAND study found that American children see about three alcohol advertisements each day, many of which are on billboards (Ferris). Unsurprisingly, many of these ads led the children to view alcohol more positively (Martino, et al.).

How does such discussion with children play out in day-to-day life? My wife and I have three children under age eight, and we have had a number of occasions when the subject of alcohol has come up. Alcohol is so prevalent in our society that discussions of it arise even in families that do not drink. We attempt to answer all of their questions about it at age-appropriate levels. The conversations are short, but repeated. Short conversations can make a big impression (“Why Small Conversations . . .”). The goal of these conversations is to convey that alcohol is not a fun thing that God wants us to avoid for complicated, arcane theological reasons that Mom and Dad have a hard time explaining. Rather, the goal is to use accessible biblical and scientific evidence to show that alcohol is dangerous, and God wants us to avoid it

because he loves us. Our children have been able to understand enough about the harms of alcohol to have a healthy apprehension of it, as well as a passionate desire to avoid it and see other people avoid it as well. In fact, our children see alcoholic beverages as poison. So they are. As children get older, the conversations will need to pull in more concrete evidence from research, personal examples, and scriptural exposition.

Congregational Love and Leadership

We must make our congregations places where our young people can find consistent, loving, faithful instruction and personal counsel on moral issues such as abstinence from alcohol. Does congregational leadership know what the children's Bible class teachers believe about alcohol? Shepherding the flock involves lovingly protecting it from spiritual dangers, including moral sins (Acts 20:28–32; 1 Pet. 5:1–11). Is the preacher willing and able to give relevant and clear teaching on the subject? Can the youth minister be relied upon to give a scriptural answer to questions about drink? Do those instructing the church on behalf of the eldership know how to give a biblical answer to those who advocate for moderate/social drinking? In our day, it would be reckless to assume that such questions will not come up. Are members on the lookout for young people who need help bearing their burdens? (Gal. 6:2).

When we find that a brother or sister is involved in the sin of drinking, do we address it scripturally? Do we love our brethren enough to enter boldly the struggle for their souls and “restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1)? If a member is involved in the sin of drinking, will his divisive influence go unchecked among other members of the congregation? Paul's words apply to this sin as surely as they apply to others: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Rm. 16:17; cf. 2 Thes. 3:6). What about the other works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19–21) that often

come with close association with alcohol—sensuality, carousing, and outbursts of anger? Advocacy for loosening biblical morality is not limited to the drinking issue; it applies also the modern dance, immodest apparel, gambling, and such things.

Our young people need to grow up in congregations where sin is kept out of the camp. If the biblical commands to practice church discipline have been ignored, then it is going to be very difficult to stifle the leaven of pro-alcohol sentiment once it takes root among some members of the congregation (cf. Mt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:1–11; 2 Thes. 3:14–15; 1 Tim. 1:19–20; Tit. 3:10). This challenge to discipline is not unique to the alcohol issue but applies to every division in the church. How tragic if a young person rationalizes any sin because of the impure influence of an erring Christian. If a child of mine ever goes astray from the Lord Jesus, I pray that the elders of the church where he or she has been a member will not rest until they have exhausted every means at their disposal to restore him or her.

As Christians in our families and congregations, we have rich resources at our disposal to equip our children in resisting the devil (Eph. 6:11–18; Jas. 4:6–7).

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HELPING THE STRUGGLING AND RESTORING THE FALLEN

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People who struggle with an addiction to alcohol, or any other thing for that matter, must first recognize the need to change their hearts. Those who would help them must kindly point to the importance of changing motive by

changing motivation. Alcohol is among a group of addictive things that have become a "severe problem, in part, because we live in an age that has lost its spiritual compass. Drugs, more and more, are being used to fill the place in human hearts that only God himself can fill" (Cleave 11). My friend Mike Price, a counselor, says behavior only changes if motive changes. "The final answer for our national problem of substance abuse lies in a change in

our values as individuals, from self-centeredness to God-centeredness” (Ibid 13).

The Heart in Scripture Is the Mind

The heart and mind are one and the same in Scripture. Nebuchadnezzar heard a holy one say (regarding himself), “Let his heart be changed from that of a man, let him be given the heart of a beast, and let seven times pass over him” (Dan. 4:16, NKJV). Despite Daniel’s advice, the king did have his heart taken away. He later reported, “At the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever” (Dan. 4:34). Notice that his heart was taken away and his understanding returned, thus we conclude the heart and mind are the same.

God’s Loving Heart Reached Out to Lost Mankind

The first eleven chapters of Romans present a remarkable picture of God’s loving heart as revealed in his work to save lost mankind. The gospel, defined by Paul as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:3–4), is God’s power to save man (Rm. 1:16–17). Our heavenly Father’s impartial judgment reveals all under sin, but in his mercy, he sent his Son to pay the price for those sins (Rm. 2–3). The law of Moses did not bring the promise of eternity. Actively trusting God will result in receiving his grace (Rm. 4).

God’s Son gave his life for those trapped in sin (Rm. 5). The freeing power of his sacrifice is accessed by following the pattern of the gospel in being baptized (Rm. 6). Man can be delivered from his wretched condition through Jesus Christ (Rm. 7). There is no condemnation in Christ (Rm. 8). The promise of God is available to all Abraham’s children who actively trust their loving Father (Rm. 9). Salvation comes by calling on the Lord (Rm. 10; Acts 2:21, 38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21). The Almighty will save all of spiritual

Israel who remain in Christ where the goodness of God is found (Rm. 11).

God Wants Our Heart in Return

Paul turns from describing how God’s loving heart reached out to helpless man to the fact that God wants man’s heart in return. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Rm. 12:1). “Beseech” means “to admonish, to encourage, to exhort” (Rienecker 375). His encouragement is based on points set forth in the first eleven chapters, as the word “therefore” indicates. The apostle has clearly shown God’s “mercies,” which is “pity arising from the miserable state of the one in need” (Ibid).

We are to “present” (the technical term for presenting the Levitical victims and offerings, Vincent 153), our bodies as living sacrifices. This phrase is a synecdoche for the outward expression of our heart’s desire that stands in stark contrast to the animals offered under Moses’ law. “God requires that we offer a ‘holy’ (*hagios*) life (one that is upright, consecrated, and pure)” (Price 251). “Acceptable to God” emphatically makes the sacrifice be on God’s terms, not ours. “Reasonable” is “not in the popular sense of the term, as a thing *befitting* or *proper*, but *rational*, as distinguished from merely external or material” (Vincent 154). It refers to turning our minds over to the Almighty.

Transforming the Mind

Paul continued the thought with, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rm. 12:2). The word “conformed” is only used here and in 1 Peter 1:14. It is related to the English word *mold*; “the world has a *mold* that it uses to shape people (compare Eph. 2:1–2). Those who allow the world to squeeze them into this *mold* are condemned because the thinking

and lifestyle of the world are contrary to the ways of God” (Price 253). The original word actually includes the word “not” and is a present imperative with the negative which “indicates the discontinuance of an action in progress or means that the action is not to be continually done” (Rienecker 375). It requires each of us to actively say, “No.” Paul said he had to do that daily (1 Cor. 9:27; 15:31).

“Transformed” comes from the word that gives us the word *metamorphosis*. “In the present case, the mind is the subject of the change, or undergoes it; while the change itself consists in renewing or renovating the mind. In other words, the mind, instead of being fashioned after this world, is to be so changed in belief, desire, and purpose as to lead to a life unlike the world” (Lard 381). The Christian’s renewed mind “tests by experience the will of God, and knows it to be indeed the will of the Holy One of Israel (Jn. 7:17), to be admired, followed and reduced to life” (McGarvey 489). Growing up in Christ means changing the mind through the practice of differentiating between good and bad so that one might teach others the mind-transforming will of God (Heb. 5:12–14).

Humility Brings God’s Help to the Struggling and Fallen

Those who would help the struggling need to encourage them to give their hearts to God. They will rejoice in the knowledge that he cares for them. That care is readily available for anyone who humbles himself. “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:6–7). The word for “humble” is passive and imperative. Peter is commanding one to allow God to shape his life. When the time is right, he will raise you up from the depressed pit.

One way God lifts people up is through the actions of his children. They, too, must be humble. Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, saying, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a

one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). The word for “restore” is present active imperative, meaning “to restore, to correct. It is used especially as a surgical term, of setting a bone or joint” (Rienecker 518). Notice, this action is not being taken “in a proud, Pharisaical spirit, but in the spirit of gentleness, bearing in mind that thou thyself art not beyond the reach of temptation” (McGarvey 284).

The next two verses advance the thought. “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another” (Gal. 6:2–4). Those who fall into the trap of sin often feel a weight of sorrow. Some just cannot forgive themselves. They need help to overcome the sorrow. Fellow Christians need to point them to Paul’s words to Rome: “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rm. 8:1). That walk yields the continual cleansing of Christ’s blood (1 Jn. 1:7, 9).

*The path to
restoration starts
when one owns his
sin and gives his heart
completely to God.*

Generally, Christ’s law can be summed up as the law of love. It is the type of love that causes one to think of others above, or at least equal to, self (Jn. 13:34; 15:12; 1 Jn. 3:23; Mt. 7:12; 22:39). All Christians are subject to error. None should take a superior attitude. In point of fact, we are not any better than any other Christian. Instead of comparing our lives with those of other men with similar weaknesses, we should test ourselves against the perfect standard of God’s Word.

This would keep one from being happy over another's weaknesses. It would also force each to strive for better service and seek joy in his own manner of life (2 Tim. 4:1–2).

Restoration Requires Owning One's Mistakes

Those who want to help people struggling with addiction to alcohol need to help them see the importance of owning one's mistakes. King Saul demonstrates the tragic results of failing to own his sin. He was commanded to utterly destroy the Amalekites. Samuel said Saul did not obey the Lord's command because he saved some of the spoil and King Agag. Rather than take responsibility for his actions, Saul said, "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, and gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, and brought back Agag king of Amalek; I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:20–21).

Saul sinned by lying to Samuel, God's spokesman, and devising service to God that was not justified, thinking the end justifies the means. The result was explained by Samuel: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He also has rejected you from being king" (1 Sam. 15:22–23).

Saul of Tarsus saw what he had done and sought to change. He declared to Agrippa and Festus, "Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them" (Acts 26:9–10). He went on to say, "I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities" (26:11).

This explains Jesus' words to Saul on the Damascus' road. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). Luke reports what happened when he realized the voice was that of Jesus. "He, trembling and astonished, said, 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'" He was told to go into the city and he would be told what to do. He did not eat or drink for three days (9: 6, 9). Ananias, the Lord's messenger, told him, "Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16). By owning his own sins, Paul gained the assurance that the Lord would deliver him even from death (2 Tim. 4:16–18).

Conclusion

Restoring the fallen and strengthening the struggling begins with getting them to surrender their hearts to God. This can only be achieved by each of us owning our mistakes. Strugglers and those who fall will, from time to time, need humble assistance as they deal with recurring challenges. No one can force them to change, but good brethren with love can strive to attempt to prick their hearts so they will desire to change.

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PREACHING ON ALCOHOL WITHOUT COMPROMISE

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Generally speaking, there are three ingredients for a good, solid sermon: Exposition of a given Scripture, illustration for clarity, and practical application. Sometimes the most challenging is the application.

Plain and practical application can be the most controversial and intimidating of all, because it walks through the protective screen of the theoretical and says, “Now we will talk about what this Scripture means for your life.” It is the application that forces admission of what God is saying to us, personally, through the Bible. It presses the point, and it is simply essential for worthwhile preaching. Because application begs listeners to put the Scriptures into practice— yes, even sometimes to change courses—it is the part of a sermon that makes some preachers weak-kneed.

Jesus’ teachings did not omit application. When he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness, he reached back into Deuteronomy chapters six and eight and used the quoted lines of Scripture to resist the devil. It was the ability to apply them accurately and powerfully that overcame Satan’s efforts. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But he answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Mt. 4:3–4).

Our directive is to learn the moral teachings of Scripture and to insert them into decisions and practices in whatever era and society we find ourselves.

Preaching Against Moderate Drinking from “And the Like”

Throughout this edition of *The Spiritual Sword*, you will find references to every passage of Scripture that explicitly speaks to the subject of intoxicating beverages. Some of these are from the New Testament and speak plainly:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19–21).

Are preachers wrong to preach against such things as moderate drinking? If they do preach that moderate drinking is sinful, are they contradicting the long-held virtue of “speaking where the Bible speaks and being silent where it is silent”? The answer is no. Paul made this clear in Galatians 5:21, as he finished the list of damnable sins and concluded with this one: “and the like.” The strength of these words is in the fact that they are included in the list of things that will keep people out of heaven. But that phrase implies that we are to use our

judgment to apply the passage. The Greek word for “like” is *homoios*. Strong’s defines it as, “similar (in appearance or character).” The Holy Spirit is enjoining readers to see what could be similar in appearance or character to getting drunk. Is drinking moderately similar in appearance to drinking much?

Preaching the Unnecessary Risks One Takes When He Drinks

If one drinks moderately, is there a risk that impressionable young people will learn that he drinks intoxicating beverages and be persuaded to do the same? If it is not wrong to drink moderately (though I am convinced that it is), and you can successfully restrain yourself to drinking just a little, will all those teens be able to successfully restrain themselves, or will some of them have trouble knowing when to stop? When I was in junior high school, a student in our drafting class used to bring liquor to school in a baby food jar. According to him, it came from his father’s liquor cabinet. I rather doubt the father knew his son was taking it.

Is there a risk that after being a “moderate” drinker for some years you will experience a time in which you face tragedy, financial reversals, or serious disappointment in your marriage? Will you remember how numbing an alcoholic beverage can be and then drink beyond “moderately”? It would be easy. No one who begins drinking expects to eventually ruin his life completely with an alcohol addiction.

Preaching the Inherent Deception of Alcohol

Attention should be drawn in our preaching to passages that warn of self-deception. Remember Jesus said the world’s greatest deceiver is Satan, the father of lies (Jn. 8:44).

Who is deceived? People are, and the warnings are strong:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9–10).

The deceptions in reference to beverage alcohol should be evident to all. The pervasive view about drinking alcohol is this: “The only ones who are actually deceived by alcohol are those who are unwilling or unable to control it, and they become alcoholics.” But that is not what God’s word says. Consider Proverbs 20:1, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.”

The danger of alcohol is not just its abuse, but the quiet deception that convinces people they can control what Scripture warns will control them.

There are four categories of people who are most often deceived by intoxicating beverages:

1. Teens may drink and deny the consequences. When teens drink, they are playing with fire and often do not know it. I conducted the funeral of such a 19-year-old boy. He was cool, popular, fun, bright, and he liked to party. At 1:00 a.m., he and his friends were racing on a remote road in the country; they had been drinking. He put the front bumper against an oak tree at a high rate of speed. His friends

tried to comfort him by the light of his headlights as he died.

2. One middle-school teacher recounted with sadness the life problems of ninth graders in her class who would sneak around and drink alcohol. Perhaps the perils of alcohol were never taught in their homes. Instead, by example they were taught, "You will enjoy alcohol in moderation, when you are old enough." For teens, that translates to "alcohol makes you mature." Sometimes teens have a propensity to feel invincible.
3. Adults who drink may understand there are risks, but minimize the risks as being very small. They discount the potential dangers when such risks are, in reality, great and threatening.
4. People who consider themselves moderate drinkers, especially if they are professing Christians, assume they can stop their drinking before it crosses into something they considered is prohibited in Scripture. The Washington Group considers a man who drinks four standard drinks a day and up to fourteen a week, a moderate drinker. The US Centers for Disease Control agree with these numbers. Is it reasonable to assume that a man drinking four drinks in a day would find it easy to never drink more under stressful situations? Is it probable that God agrees with numbers like these?
5. Alcoholics are often deceived into thinking they can never quit, or that they can continue to drink and still maintain a good influence, or that they can still be successful in business and marriage. Those are more lies from hell to keep people reaching for another drink.

I recently taught a class of early-teen boys, and I asked them how many knew of alcohol problems in your extended family in recent times. Hands raised and the boys told sad stories of a grandmother, a brother, an uncle, and others. They talked about how

various ones in their family were harmed by their family members who drank. Even among boys whose parents were Christians, there were sad stories to tell regarding alcohol.

Preaching the Lives of People Who Drank and Regretted It

There are examples of people in the Bible who drank alcohol. What they all have in common is being "deceived" and feeling "regret." They all presumably thought they would always be able to control their drinking, but in the end, they did not. Perhaps these were some of their regrets. Some of these left this world in a state of drunkenness and lost their souls.

Noah: "Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk and became uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside" (Gen. 9:20–22). Noah's regrets: "I hurt my family. I forever blemished my reputation."

Lot: "So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. It happened on the next day that the firstborn said to the younger, 'Indeed I lay with my father last night; let us make him drink wine tonight also, and you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve the lineage of our father.' Then they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose" (Gen. 19:33–35). Lot had regrets: He abdicated his role as leader of his family, and the result was ruin that lasted for generations and negatively affected thousands of people.

Nabal: "Now Abigail went to Nabal, and there he was, holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king. And Nabal's heart

was merry within him, for he was very drunk; therefore, she told him nothing, little or much, until morning light” (1 Sam. 25:36). Nabal’s regrets: He built within himself a mean disposition and a barrier between his wife and himself. He died a miserable man and left his wife with a mountain of bad memories.

Ahasuerus: “On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded . . . seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing her royal crown, in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold” (Esther 1:10–11). Ahasuerus regretted making his wife ashamed of him and publicly making statements that utterly destroyed their marriage.

Belshazzar: “While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them . . . and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone” (Dan 5:2–4). Belshazzar regretted mocking the things pertaining to God and influencing others to do the same. He could say, “God took away my throne and my life” (cf. 5:23, 30).

Preaching Passages that Help Us Determine Truth about Drinking

There is a social stigma against getting staggering drunk, but not against socially or moderately drinking. Thus, refraining from preaching against moderate drinking is considered, by many, to be the reasonable and balanced position.

I believe Christians should avoid drinking beverage alcohol altogether. An action does not have to be prohibited explicitly in the Bible for it to be wrong. A major stated contention today is, “The Bible does not condemn drinking—only getting drunk.” And yet, Scripture lays down principles that are violated even when one drinks moderately. We all agree that American slavery was likewise wrong, not because it is explicitly condemned (slavery is actually regulated in Scripture [Col. 3:22–4:1]), but because it violates Christian principles (Mt. 7:12; Phil. 2:4). Pornography is condemned, not in so many words, but in abundantly expressed principles (Mt. 5:28). Recreational drug use is condemned in the same way. “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

Is drinking alcohol consistent with being serious about obeying God and going to heaven? Paul wrote, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). Is drinking beverage alcohol helpful and expedient in my Christian walk?

Preachers, please do not become too timid to apply biblical principles to the subject of moderately drinking intoxicating beverages. Preach godly living using Scripture, logic, and kindness. Preach with courage.

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IS ONE DRINK A SIN?

Allen Webster



Is it a sin to drink a beer at a game, to have a glass of wine with dinner, or have a shot to take the edge off? Some Christians argue that there is nothing wrong with any of these. What does Scripture teach?

Framing the Questions

Some have appealed to such defenses as, “There is alcohol in Nyquil and vanilla,” to suggest that the social consumption of one drink cannot be condemned. At first hearing, this may sound reasonable, but such comparisons do not clarify the issue—they confuse it. No one is arguing that all uses of alcohol in every form are sinful.

- Paul authorized limited medicinal use: “Use a little wine for your stomach’s sake” (1 Tim. 5:23). The intent is treatment (use), not pleasure or relaxation. Medicinal use is controlled (little), purposeful (stomach’s sake), and non-recreational.
- Vanilla desserts are non-intoxicating and are not consumed for intoxicating effects.



See Spiritual Sword Online Article:
Allen Webster, “‘There Is Alcohol in
Your Nyquil so Don’t Tell Me I Can’t
Drink Beer’”
(spiritualsword.com/0008-2).

The first question then is: Is drinking one beer, one glass of wine, or a shot of whiskey sinful?

The second question is, “What is ‘drunk?’” Someone might say, “One drink does not

make me drunk.” But how is drunkenness being framed? Is it feeling “buzzed?”; is it being characterized by noticeable signs—loud/slurred speech, staggering steps, slowed reaction time, or loss of focus/consciousness? These physical symptoms come after what Scripture calls drunkenness. In the Bible, drunkenness is “a state in which a person’s mind, judgment, self-control, and behavior are impaired by intoxicating drink, resulting in diminished moral awareness and often sinful conduct.” Intoxication begins before what the world calls “drunk.” Framing drunkenness according to worldly standards misses the point of sobriety.

Finding the Answers

Four Bible passages clearly answer both questions:

Be sober. It is best to define “drunk” by first defining “sober.” Christians are repeatedly commanded to be “sober” (1 Thess. 5:6, 8; 1 Pet. 1:13; 5:8). “Sober” (*nepho*) literally means to be free from the influence of intoxicants. Sobriety is not avoiding looking drunk. Sobriety is being completely clear-minded. That standard is not, “Don’t lose control,” but “Do not come under the influence.” The question is not: “Can I have one drink and avoid physical effects?” The question is: “Did that one drink affect the mind God commands me to keep sober?” The moment alcohol begins to affect the mind it violates the command to be sober. A person may say, “I am not drunk,” when he is not sober.

Do not consider drinking. Solomon said, “Look not thou upon the wine when it is red ... when it moves itself aright” (Proverbs 23:31). This is not: “Do not get drunk.” This is “do not pick up a drink and consider imbibing.” If a father says to his son, “Do not

even look at drugs,” does he mean the boy can smoke one joint?

Do not start the process. Paul wrote, “Do not be drunk with wine” (Eph. 5:18) because life filled with the Spirit (5:19) is the opposite of a life filled with spirits. Drunkenness stands at odds with clear minded sobriety. Did Paul mean to imply that it is permissible to drink as long as one does not get drunk? It sounds that way in English, but the Greek present tense verb refers to the process, not just the result. Wine is a mocker—the substance itself, not to abuse of it (Prov. 20:1). Mild intoxication is still intoxication. Thus, the question is: “Does one drink affect my mind, judgment, or self-control?”

Do not poison the body. A Christian’s body is the temple of his spirit and the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16) and should not be deliberately harmed. The World Health Organization said, “There is no amount of alcohol that does not impact your health” (2023). **There is no safe level.** Ethyl alcohol is toxic. Alcohol is classified as a Group 1 carcinogen, similar to asbestos, radiation, and tobacco. The WHO notes that alcohol causes at least seven types of cancer, including breast and bowel cancer, with risks increasing the more it is consumed. The evidence shows that any consumption, regardless of quantity, harms the brain, liver, and cardiovascular system.



See Spiritual Sword Online Article:
“Diseases Caused by Alcohol”
(spiritualsword.com/0001-2).

Medical science is revising previously promoted benefits of moderate drinking. Historically, studies suggested moderate drinking might have heart benefits. However, newer, more comprehensive global studies indicate that these benefits do not outweigh the increased risks of cancer and cardiovascular disease, leading to updated global health advice. The Bible was right all along (Psa. 19:7; 33:4).

Do not go to social settings built around drinking. Galatians 5:20–21 and 1 Peter 4:3 are not limited to extreme behavior—they include the atmosphere of drinking and partying. Three of Paul’s works-of-the-flesh sins involve alcohol:

- “Excess of wine” translates one Greek word, *oinophlugia*, which means “drunkenness,” and refers to those who are addicted, heavy drinkers.
- “Revellings” translates *komos* and refers to wild partying drinkers, who often become noticeably drunk, but not always, and often engage in other wickedness associated with partying.
- “Banquetings” translates *potos* and simply means “a drinking” but without reference to amount. Potos clearly includes and condemns social drinking (Willie Ramsey, tract).

Understanding the Process

Now to the question, “Is one drink enough to reach the biblical standard of drunkenness?”

How does one drink of alcohol affect the body and mind? Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) begins to rise with one drink. Science confirms what Scripture implies: impairment begins almost immediately. Even in small amounts, alcohol affects judgment, inhibitions, and self-control. Before a man appears drunk outwardly, he is already impaired inwardly. His conscience is dulled. His ability to discern right from wrong is weaker.

The prefrontal cortex (lobe) is impacted with a level as small as 0.01% BAC intoxication.

- **0.01 to 0.05% BAC:** One may feel relaxed, less alert, and have a slight loss of judgement.
- **0.06–.15% BAC:** One may have slurred speech, reduced muscle coordination and impaired judgement, memory, or balance.

- **0.16 to 0.30% BAC:** One will feel more serious signs of intoxication such as difficulty walking and speaking. He may feel drowsy, confused, and nauseated. She may experience gaps in memory (blackouts), vomiting, or loss of consciousness.
- **Over 0.31% BAC:** Levels are especially dangerous and may even be fatal. One may lose consciousness, have trouble breathing, or go into a coma (<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/blood-alcohol-level/>).

Violating Scripture

Now to the question, “Is one U.S. standard drink enough to reach the biblical standard of drunkenness?”

Impairment can begin with as little as one swallow (see comments below). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) wrote, “Even small amounts of alcohol (BACs of 0.02–0.03%) can impair judgment and the ability to multitask.” Thus the prefrontal cortex is impacted with a BAC level of .02–.03 percent, which is typically reached after consuming about 0.6 ounces (14 grams) of pure alcohol (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration). In the U.S., a standard drink contains about 0.6 ounces, which is:

- 12 oz of beer (5% Alcohol by Volume)
- 5 oz of wine (12% ABV)
- 1.5 oz of distilled liquor (40% ABV)

At 0.02–0.03 BAC:

- The brain’s prefrontal cortex (responsible for impulse control, judgment and decision-making) is affected.
- Mood changes occur.
- Judgment begins to weaken.
- Attention and concentration decline. Divided attention becomes more difficult.
- Alertness is reduced.

- Inhibitions decrease—people become more willing to say or do what they normally would not. There is a loss of shyness and self-control. For most women, inhibitions noticeably drop at three ounces of wine.

These effects occur before any outward signs of drunkenness. God’s standard is not: “Stay upright.” It is: “Stay sober.” Thus, a person may say, “I am not drunk” (worldly definition) when already drunk (Bible definition).

Take this a step further. What happens with the first *swallow*? Most adults take in about 0.5 to 1.0 fluid ounces per swallow (small sip: ~0.5 oz; average swallow: ~0.6–0.8 oz; large gulp: ~1.0 oz or more). This means that with a standard drink (0.6 oz of pure alcohol), one reaches the ~.02 level in:

- 1 swallow (a large sip of liquor)
- 2–4 swallows (wine)
- 4–8 swallows (beer)

Let that sink in. One swallow could bring on impairment and intoxication.

Avoiding the Consequences

The principle is this: when one acts while impaired in judgment, he sins (he is not sober). The idea of “moderate drinking” assumes that one can identify the line between sobriety and drunkenness, but alcohol impairs the very judgment needed to determine that line. Instead of asking: “How much can I drink without being drunk?” a Christian asks, “Why begin a process that God warns against?” To deliberately behave foolishly is a sin (Eph. 5:15). Drinking is foolish (Prov. 20:1). Drinking is a sin.

Another question regarding consequences should be considered: What does drinking one drink say to others? Alcohol is not a neutral cultural symbol. It is widely associated with worldliness, excess (bad behavior), and addiction. A one-drink Christian can:

- Encourage weaker brethren to sin—including those he sees on Sundays.
- Confuse young people or new Christians—including one's own children.
- Damage one's influence with those he hopes to convert—including lifelong and current friends.

Remember that Jesus said, "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt. 18:6). The issue is not only, "Am I sinning?" but also, "Who am I offending?" (Rm. 14:21-23).

Conclusion: Is drinking one beer, one glass of wine, or a shot of whiskey a sin? The answer is unequivocally **yes**.

REFERENCES

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) published, "At BAC levels as low as 0.02%, there is a decline in visual functions and divided attention."

"At .02 BAC, there is a decline in visual functions ... and a decline in the ability to perform two tasks at the same time" (NHTSA). *The Effects of Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC)* "Even small amounts of alcohol (BACs of 0.02-0.03%) can impair judgment..." — National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), *Alcohol's Effects on the Body*.

<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/blood-alcohol-level/> Drunkenness of course is impacted by whether one has a full stomach or not, is male or female, genetic issues, history of drinking, but the mind is impacted regardless. BAC calculations are based on body weight and sex. Elimination rates are variable: 0.015 BAC per hour in men, and 0.018 in women, generally.

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What Is Right with the Church?

2026 LECTURESHIP

OCTOBER 4-8, 2026

East Ridge Church of Christ, East Ridge, TN (Greater Chattanooga)
www.SpiritualSword.com

Sunday, October 4

9:00 AM	Charles Cochran	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Attitude—In Spirit
10:00 AM	Wade Webster	What Is Right About the Church?
6:00 PM	Terry Jones	It Has the Right Plan of Salvation: Faith, but Not Faith Alone

Monday, October 5

9:00 AM	Austin Fowler	It Has the Right Mission: To Seek and To Save the Lost
9:30 AM	Eric Garner	It Has the Right Plan of Salvation: Repentance of Sins, Confession of Christ
10:15 AM	Gary McDade	It Has the Right Doctrine: The Cessation of Miracles and Spiritual Gifts

11:30 AM	Bill Haywood	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Preaching—Scripture Filled, the Whole Counsel
1:00 PM	Jeff Archey	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Communion—Representation and Not Transubstantiation
1:30 PM	Billy Bland	It Has the Right Organization: Elders—A Plurality of Qualified Men Over a Single Congregation
2:15 PM	Cameron Freeman	It Has the Right Plan of Salvation: Be Faithful and Don't Fall from Grace
	Jennifer Webster	It Walks in Wisdom (Ladies Class)
	Epifanio Carranza	A Closer Look at the Catechism

7:00 PM	Cliff Goodwin	It Has the Right Foundation
7:30 PM	David Smith	Baptism: Before Salvation and Not After

Tuesday, October 6

9:00 AM	Josh Allen	It Has the Right Language: Designations of the Preacher
9:30 AM	Terry Jones	It Has the Right Organization: Christ, the Only Head
10:15 AM	Wesley Skelton	It Has the Right Organization: Deacons—God's Special Servants
	Mark Reynolds	It Has the Right Stance on Moral Issues: Homosexuality
11:30 AM	Andy Baker	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Music—Congregational Singing and Not Choirs
1:00 PM	Nathan Liddell	It Has the Right Doctrine: Inspiration
1:30 PM	Parker Webster	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Communion—Observed on the First Day of Each Week
2:15 PM	Kevin Hahn	It Has the Right Plan of Salvation: Baptism—A Burial and Not Sprinkling or Pouring
	Kathryn Baker	It Walks in Joy (Ladies Class)
	Cameron Freeman	A Closer Look at the Quran
7:00 PM	Josh Cantrell	It Has the Right Purchaser
7:30 PM	Michael Shepherd	It Has the Right Plea: Speak Where the Bible Speaks and Be Silent Where It Is Silent

Wednesday, October 7

9:00 AM	Mark Reynolds	It Has the Right Language: Designations of the Christian
9:30 AM	Jason McDade	It Has the Right Work—Evangelism: Not Witnessing or Testifying
10:15 AM	Paul Sain	The Right Hope: Heaven
	Joe Wells	It Has the Right Stance on Pornography
11:30 AM	Kevin Hahn	It Has the Right Language: Designations of the Church
1:00 PM	Mark Howell	It Has the Right Work—Benevolence: Helping All in Need

1:30 PM	Brandon Blackwell	The Right Hope: The Second Coming and Not the Rapture
2:15 PM	Allen Webster	It Has the Right Stance on Moral Issues: Alcohol
	Heather Hahn	It Walks in Truth and Love (Ladies Class)
	Jaston Richter	A Closer Look at the Baptist Manual
7:00 PM	Joe Wells	It Has the Right Doctrine: Marriage
7:30 PM	Don Blackwell	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Aim—Glorifying God and Not Entertaining Men

Thursday, October 8

9:00 AM	Michael Wyatt	It Has the Right Worship: The Role of Women in Worship
9:30 AM	Wes Hazel	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Giving—As One Prospers and Not Tithing
10:15 AM	Gary Massey	It Has the Right Beginning Place: Jerusalem
	Michael Clarke	It Has the Right Stance on Moral Issues: Abortion
11:30 AM	David Jones	It Has the Right Division of the Testaments
1:00 PM	Mike Hixson	It Has the Right Plan of Salvation: Grace, but Not Grace Alone
1:30 PM	Josh Walker	It Has the Right Work: Edification—Fellowship, Correction, Teaching
2:15 PM	Kerry Duke	It Has the Right Doctrine: Hell
	Cindy Rodgers	It Walks in Peace (Ladies Class)
	Caleb Griffith	A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon
7:00 PM	Mike Hixson	It Has the Right Creed: The Bible and Not the Books of Men
7:30 PM	Allen Webster	It Has the Right Worship: The Right Music—A cappella and Not Mechanical Instruments

Monday-Thursday: singing will start at 6:30 PM

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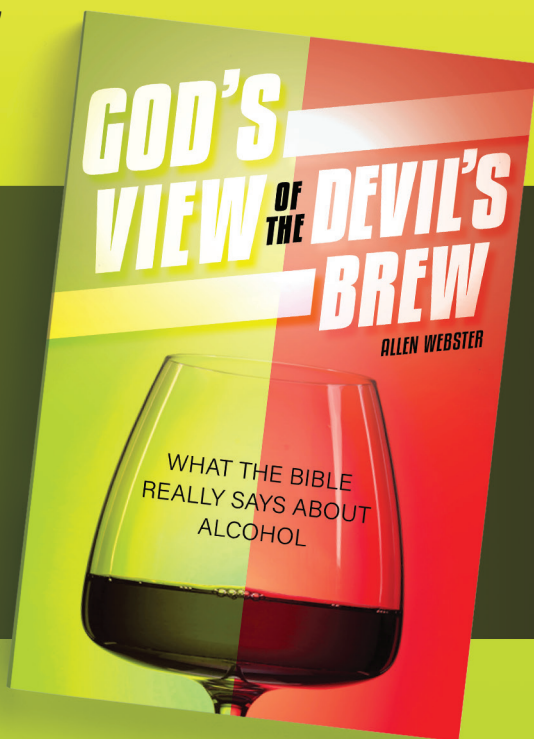
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