

## WINE – A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

### Background

In both the Old and New Testaments, the proper (moderate) use of wine – the fermented product of grapes – is depicted as a normal feature of the life of God’s people, but excessive use (drunkenness) is shown to be sinful.

Historically, abuse of many kinds of alcoholic beverages became a serious social problem during many periods, especially during and following the Industrial Revolution in large British cities, and in many early pioneer communities that spread out across America. Some evangelists, aware of the dire individual and communal effects stemming from drunkenness (including disease, child neglect, violence, other anti-social behaviour and family break-up) made abstinence from *all* forms of alcohol a feature of their preaching and teaching, accompanying the call to repentance and commitment to Christ. Methodism, the Salvation Army and (in North America especially) much independent revivalist preaching, have been associated with this linkage of themes. Undoubtedly, appeals to abstinence or temperance helped many who were misusing strong alcoholic drinks, especially distilled spirits. Consequently, countless folk who responded to such appeals to personal faith in Christ along with a call to repent of drunkenness would have experienced a beneficial transformation in their personal lifestyles and family lives at the same time as their hearts were being changed by hearing and responding to the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Social, personal and family benefits accrued from the radical change in many individuals who had been prone to drunkenness – a move from serious abuse of alcohol to complete abstinence from all alcoholic drinks. This led in some quarters to a dogmatism on the subject of abstinence which, as we will see, cannot be supported by the scriptural evidence, and indeed ignores the perfect example of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, concerning the proper, moderate taking of wine with a meal, so well attested in Jewish life (past and present). Today, in European and Mediterranean societies the cultural custom of moderate drinking of a glass or two of wine with a meal continues. In many other societies, where the culture has never been that of moderate wine consumption, distilled spirits and beer can very often pose a threat to health and social well-being. There is a huge distinction between proper use and abuse, and the Bible depicts both very clearly in many passages.

Genesis 9:20–21; 27:37; Psalm 80:8–19; Jeremiah 2:21–25 (although a choice vine, Israel rebels); Proverbs 23:21, 29–35; Isaiah 5:11–12; Habakkuk 2:15 (the allegorical reference here is to the shame that follows drunkenness)

### A gift from God

God’s gifts in creation can be (and indeed often are) misused. Wine is no exception to this general principle, but let us start with the right use first, before we return to the matter of sinful misuse.

Wine (along with olive oil, grain crops and dairy produce) was rightly seen by God’s ancient chosen people as a blessing in creation. (See, for example, Deuteronomy 7:13; 11:14.) Vineyards are mentioned many times in Scripture, as are winepresses, because wine consumption was a perfectly normal feature of Hebrew life. In Isaiah chapter 5 the construction of a vineyard provides a vivid analogy. In the New Testament there is no embarrassment when artefacts used in the storage and transportation of wine (‘wineskins’) are mentioned to illustrate an important point (Luke 5:37). At his first great miracle at Cana, Jesus turned water into good wine, which was enjoyable for the community as they shared a celebration at the wedding feast (John 2:1–11). Not only was wine the customary drink in the everyday life of the Hebrew people, it was also used to commemorate the mighty acts of God. In the present day as in ancient times, wine is used in the Jewish Passover celebrations. This is part of normal Jewish family life, in which drunkenness would be extremely unlikely to feature.

At the Last Supper, wine was in the cup which Jesus gave to his disciples and they could look forward to the day when he will drink wine with them again, “*in my Father’s kingdom*”. (See Matthew 26:29.) Throughout the centuries since then, Christians have obeyed Jesus’ command, using bread and wine at celebrations of the Lord’s Supper to commemorate the Lord’s saving death and resurrection until that Day when he shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

The proper, moderate use of wine and the biblical prohibition of drunkenness may have been well-known to most Jews, but some of the new Gentile believers may have required more instruction in the matter. In matters of what we eat and drink, of course, we are not to legislate for other Christians, except to remind ourselves and others that what God prohibits (drunkenness, greed and sloth included, amongst other sinful lifestyles such as those marked by pride and unforgiveness) offend him and are very bad for us. God wants us to enable our brothers and sisters to have enough to enjoy his creation gifts appropriately, providing for the needy (e.g. ‘widows and orphans’) sharing his good gifts in his created order, especially with fellow-believers, and, particularly, for all of us

to thank him for those gifts. Jesus gave thanks to the Father over bread and wine. We are to follow his example. In Jewish and Christian understanding, as is revealed in the Bible, God is very much interested in all the earthy practicalities of how we are living, and what our attitudes are – toward him and toward others.

Judges 9:13; Esther 1:10; Psalm 104:15; Ecclesiastes 10:19; Isaiah 55:1–2; Zechariah 10:7

### **The misuse of a gift**

It is wise to eat appropriate amounts of a good, healthy range of fresh, natural foods, but if we eat excessively we commit the sin of gluttony and we also become more prone to many of the diseases which afflict the supposedly 'developed' world. By the same token, if we over-indulge in wine and other (perhaps much stronger) alcoholic drinks we may succumb to drunkenness (also condemned in Scripture) and again become more susceptible to another range of diseases and disorders. In matters of food and drink, wisdom and moderation are required, and excess should be avoided for both spiritual and health reasons. Again, we can reflect that the 'Maker's handbook' provides the best guidance to right behaviour in the areas of food and drink, as in every other area it addresses!

Isaiah 28:1–8; Proverbs 20:1; 21:17; 23:20; 23:32–34

### **Legalistic prohibition**

In Old Testament times, some minority sects practised total abstinence; other groups abstained from wine temporarily, when carrying out certain religious duties.

However, to teach that total abstinence from alcoholic beverages is a requirement of moral law or the 'law of Christ', or is somehow more 'Christian' than moderate consumption of wine with a meal, has no support whatsoever in Scripture, nor is it borne out by the teaching and practice of Jesus and the apostles. Such elevation of 'total abstinence' is in a very obvious sense legalistic, and it is an especially curious form of legalism in that it flies in the face not only of Jewish practice and observance, even the Passover celebration, but also, even more significantly, it runs counter to the perfect example of righteous living in the Son of God himself. Jesus never compromised the truth and he did not do a single unrighteous act. So, for Jesus, drinking wine moderately with a meal was not some sort of reluctant concession to, or participation in, a supposed 'vice'. That would be a manifestly absurd idea. On the contrary it was the right and proper exemplary enjoyment of social life with fellow-Jews of a gift in creation, revealed by the One who showed us all perfectly, firstly how we should live together with others in society; then in the community of faith (as in the eucharistic life of the church after Pentecost); and, finally, as an illustration of the future Messianic banquet in which believers will enjoy the best wine of all with our Lord when he personally governs his kingdom in a new heaven and earth. In none of this, the truly biblical picture, do we gain any notion that the drinking of the fermented fruit of the vine is evil (though people who misuse the gift by becoming drunk are sinning). It is, however, a point of view that is not unknown amongst those who trace their teaching tradition back to the evangelists and revivalists referred to in our 'background' paragraph above. To be fair to those who espouse such total abstinence, they are often speaking into a social context in which there is hazardous consumption of strong proof, distilled alcoholic drinks (such as whisky and other spirits) rather than the ordinary wine of the Ancient Near East. In conclusion, the Bible does not say or even suggest that total abstinence from alcoholic drinks is essential to salvation, so legalism must be avoided in this area. Nonetheless, where addiction (and, consequently, drunkenness) is or has been a particular personal problem, there are those who will be prudent to avoid the occasions of temptation.

As always, the Bible student is encouraged to consider the biblical evidence.

Ephesians 5:18; 1 Timothy 3:8; 5:23; Titus 2:3

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<sup>1</sup>Note: A line of argument used to be adopted in some quarters which suggested that biblical wine was not really wine as we know it today. However, whilst wine making techniques no doubt altered somewhat down the ages, it was obviously perfectly possible for people in the biblical era to have got drunk on wine or the risk of doing so would not have needed to be the subject of the warnings in both Testaments, spanning the relevant periods. That is clear from the biblical evidence.