

**UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:
“CAN A CHRISTIAN DRINK ALCOHOL?
(1 TIM. 3:8, 5:23)”**

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Obviously what is meant by our title is, “Can a Christian drink alcohol *without violating the teachings of the Bible?*” So what is “alcohol” and what does the Bible say about its consumption?

MY OWN PRACTICE

As I approach this hotly debated topic, I deem it wise to tell you, my listeners/readers, about my personal conduct as it relates to alcohol. I have never been a drinker or even a “moderate drinker,” not even when I was a missionary in Italy where some brethren are such. I have not ever kept alcoholic beverages in my home and if given the opportunity to vote on its sale in my city or county I would vote against it. I tell you this so that you may know that if I have any prejudices in this matter they would be in favor of total abstinence. But my practice does not necessarily explain *what the Bible teaches* on this matter. I may choose *not* to do something the Bible allows . . . just as some people choose not to marry.

WHAT IS ALCOHOL?

The word “alcohol” is not found in most English translations of the Bible but the idea encapsulated in it is found many times. Our English word “alcohol” is defined as, “Either of two volatile, flammable, pungent liquids, ethanol, the intoxicating principle of wines and liquors, and methanol, or wood alcohol” (Funk 15). Notice that alcohol is “the intoxicating principle” of various liquids. To “intoxicate” means to “make drunk” or “excite to a degree of frenzy” (Funk 341).

DEFINITION OF TERMS

So what terms do we have in the Old Testament that may describe alcoholic beverages? Only three Hebrew terms are significant: *tirosh* (used 38 times), *yayin* (141 times), and *shekhar* (22 times). **TIROSH** is translated as “new wine.” It sometimes describes juice which is still “in the cluster” of grapes (Isa. 65:8). [All Biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.] This may refer to unfermented grape juice, though even the conservative Edward J. Young suggests that it seems that *tirosh* is here “used proleptically, as though to say, ‘as [fermented] wine comes from the cluster of grapes, etc.’” (507). “Prolepsis” is a figure of speech by which there is “an anticipation of some future time” (Bullinger 914). An example would be like saying, “When President Lincoln was a little boy he once disobeyed his mother.” We anticipate his presidency. Young suggests that “*tirosh*” in the “cluster” anticipates when it will be fermented. But, again this student believes “*tirosh*” here may refer to unfermented grape juice. But we also note passages like Judges 9:13 where *tirosh* is said to “cheer” the hearts of “men.” It seems likely that this cheering refers to an effect produced by its alcoholic content. Compare “merry” in 2 Samuel 13:28. Further, in Hosea 4:11 we read, “harlotry, wine and new wine [*tirosh*] take away the understanding.” Here *tirosh* is, without dispute, alcoholic. Therefore, it seems J. Paterson gives a good definition: “*Tirosh* is the newly expressed grape juice, BEFORE and DURING the fermentation process. . . .” (1038; emphasis mine, EDE). As Dunlop Moore says, “The references to wine-making in the Bible let us see that no effort was made to preserve the expressed [squeezed out] juice of the grape from exposure to the air, and it would, of course, ferment. . . . But long before it matured. . . .”

[before fermentation was completed] it could intoxicate . . ." (253). Perhaps Moore should have said "no effort" to "preserve" it in an unfermented state was USUALLY made.

Easton points out that "in the climate of Palestine fermentation begins almost immediately, frequently on the same day for juice pressed in the morning, but never later than the next day" (3087). This necessarily means that most of the juices from the grapevine that a Hebrew possessed would be at least partially fermented.

The second significant Hebrew term is YAYIN. This is generally translated into English with the word "wine." Nearly all lexicons and dictionaries define the term as being alcoholic. For example, the Brown, Driver and Briggs lexicon says it is "wine . . . a common drink . . . intoxicating. . . ." (406). Nelson's dictionary says "*yayin* is clearly . . . an intoxicating beverage" (472). This student does recognize that the editors of lexicons and dictionaries are uninspired and therefore may sometimes arrive at prejudiced conclusions, but, unfortunately, the candid Bible student must admit that at least some brethren do likewise. Therefore, it is necessary for each of us to go to the Bible passages ourselves to see if they will tell us whether this wine (*yayin*) has or does not have the potential to intoxicate. Are there some passages that show it does *not*? One fine brother believes he has found at least one. He says, in Lamentations 2:12, "It is clear that it (*yayin*) is not an intoxicant" (South 2). The passage speaks of mothers who are dealing with starving children when Jerusalem was under siege and it says the children say to their mothers, "Where is grain and wine [*yayin*]?" South's reasoning seems to be that it is *obvious* that an even slightly intoxicating drink would never be given to children. The trouble is, what is *obvious* to one person is not obvious to another. In fact, Burton Easton uses this same passage to

show that an alcoholic *yayin* “was drunk by all ages, even by the very young” (3088)! John Willis agrees saying, it seems “unusual to western ears, but was quite appropriate for that time and place” (348). Further, I have personally lived in a culture where some mothers would allow, I believe, an eight- or ten-year-old child to drink wine with a light alcoholic content. In addition, I have recently read the results of a study done in Germany which indicated that “... in 2010; 397 *children* went to hospitals in Berlin for excessive consumption of alcohol” (Rosini 1; emphasis added, EDE). So, I doubt the validity of South’s interpretation of Lamentations 2:12.

Perhaps one could make a better case for a non-alcoholic *yayin* in Isaiah 16:10, where the prophet speaks of the wine presses of Moab and says, “There is no wine [*yayin*]” coming from those presses because God has cursed Moab. But, even here, “wine” could be used proleptically (anticipating a future state). However, it is possible that here, exceptionally, “wine [*yayin*]” means unfermented grape juice.

But it must be admitted that “wine [*yayin*]” is generally alcoholic. It intoxicated Noah (Gen. 9:21), it caused Lot to lose his senses and commit incest (Gen. 19:32–35), it caused Nabal to be “very drunk” (1 Sam. 25:36–37), and it caused “the drunkards of Ephraim” to be “overcome” (Isa. 28:1). Indeed, *yayin* generally has some alcoholic content. In fact, in all cases where we can *be sure of* its meaning, it is alcoholic.

There is still a third significant Hebrew term: **SHEKHAR**. It is normally translated “strong drink” and it became the “comprehensive term for all kinds of fermented drinks, excluding wine” (Edwards 879). Thus, “strong drink” (*shekhar*) and “wine” (*yayin*) are paired together frequently (as in Lev. 10:9) and the two terms are normally “mutually exclusive” and together are “exhaustive of all

kinds of intoxicants" (Edwards 879). There can be no doubt that *shekhar* was intoxicating . . . the attempt made to prove that it was simply unfermented juice of certain fruits is quite without foundation" (880).

In the New Testament the only really significant Greek word used is **OINOS** which appears about thirty times and is nearly always translated as "wine." Though some have claimed it usually describes "must" or newly pressed, non-alcoholic grape juice, that is incorrect. Wine (*oinos*) is very likely alcoholic in Matthew 9:17 (used three times), in Matthew 27:34, in Mark 2:22 (four times), in Mark 15:23, in Luke 5:39, in Luke 10:34, and in several others that we will discuss later. Further, it is without doubt alcoholic in Romans 14:21 and Ephesians 5:18 (where it is said to cause one to be "drunk")! As Burton Easton says, *oinos* is "allied to" the "Hebrew word *yayin*" (3086). In fact, in the Septuagint Greek version of the Old Testament, *oinos* "stands . . . mainly for *yayin*" (C. Brown 918). That is, *oinos* is normally used to translate the Hebrew word *yayin*. Now, as already noted, *yayin* is nearly always, if not always, an alcoholic beverage. Therefore, when the Bauer lexicon defines *oinos* (wine) it says, "a beverage made from fermented juice of the grape" (701). This is what we are normally to understand when we encounter it in the New Testament. But before we go to our passages of interest in the New Testament we need to discuss other aspects of the problem.

Now, as noticed, "strong drink [*shekhar*]" always has the potential to intoxicate and "new wine [*tirosh*]" generally does and "wine [*yayin*]" does in every case where the context speaks clearly. The term "wine [*oinos*]" in the New Testament is the Greek equivalent of *yayin* in Hebrew, so a proper presumption would be that *oinos* (as is true with *yayin*) has the potential to intoxicate unless the context clearly proves that a non-alcoholic liquid is being

described. The trouble is that when we, with our prejudices, would like to think “wine” is just unfermented grape juice, “. . . the context does not give enough evidence to know for sure” (South 2). But, as noticed, it is at least possible that in a few passages, like Isaiah 65:8, the Bible uses the phrase “new wine [*tirosh*]” to refer to unfermented grape juice. To us that is confusing because we do not use it so. We must keep this in mind.

Still another important observation: even when a liquid is described as “strong drink” in the Bible, though that does signify an intoxicating drink, still “strong” is a relative term. As R. Laird Harris says, “Israel had no strong drink in the modern sense. Distillation of *alcohol* was invented . . . in medieval times. Before that only natural drinks were available. The most common natural drinks were *light* wines and beer” (568; emphasis added, EDE). In fact, the distillation of “beverages began in the Jin (12th–13th centuries) and Southern Song (10th–13th centuries) dynasties according to archaeological evidence (“Distillation” 8/15/2017).

Then we need to add to that the fact that, for peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world, from about the second century BC onward, fermented drinks like *yayin* and *oinos* began to be diluted and by New Testament times such was common practice. In fact, by that time, to drink them full strength was considered “a barbarian (or Scythian) custom” (Athenaeus). Thus in an uninspired Jewish document which began to be compiled before the time of Christ, the ratio is given as “one-third of a cup of wine to two-thirds of water” (Midrash 135d). In other documents of the time and later, in the Jewish Talmud, the ratio is given as three parts of water to one part of wine. Yet it is clear that the term “wine” was used to describe the mixture. So, when one considers that the Old Testament “wine [*yayin*]” was probably similar to our beer in alcoholic content, that is,

around 5–7%, and then it was diluted at least 67%; a good guess would be that it had less than 2–3% of alcoholic content.

When one compares that concentration of alcohol in modern-day intoxicants with those, the result is enlightening. Our beers “are typically 5%” while wines “are typically 13.5%” with “fortified wines” being from “15 to 22%” and “spirits typically 30 to 40%” (*Alcoholic Drink* 7/28/17, 5). Thus, while some of their drinks were intoxicating, it took a lot more quantity to produce a negative effect on one’s thinking and performance. But some people did become intoxicated by drinking them.

NEGATIVE PASSAGES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

There are many passages in the Old Testament that show alcohol’s negative effects beginning with Noah drinking “wine [*yayin*]” and becoming “drunk” and “uncovering himself” (Gen. 9:21). Another is in Proverbs 20:1; “wine [*yayin*] is a mocker and strong drink [*shekhar*] is raging and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.” This is definitely negative, but a valid question is, “Does this condemn its *use* as being ‘unwise’ or only its *abuse*, ‘whoever is intoxicated’?” Still another negative passage in Proverbs is at 23:29–33, which says,

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long over wine [*yayin*], those who go to taste mixed wine. Do not look on the wine [*yayin*] when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent and stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things and your mind will utter perverse things.

Clearly “wine” can have many negative effects on our

lives. But what is condemned here by God? Is it any person who takes a “look” at it (v.31), or is the emphasis on the one who “lingers long” over it (v.30)? Allen Ross, a conservative Protestant, says the writer is describing, not the one who drinks, but “the one who drinks *too much*” (1072, emphasis mine, EDE). And Isaiah 5:11 seems to give credence to that interpretation: “Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink [*shekhar*], who stay up late in the evening that wine [*yayin*] may inflame them!”

Still another negative passage is found in Leviticus. There we read what God said to Aaron about the Levites who served as priests. Leviticus 10:9–10 says,

“Do not drink wine [*yayin*] or strong drink [*shekhar*], neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you will not die—it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations—and so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean . . .”

But, notice please, that this is a rule for the Levites *when* they “come into the tent.” Does that mean it is not *always* binding upon them? These are *some* of the Old Testament passages that speak of the negative aspects of alcoholic beverages, but that is not the whole story.

OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGES THAT ARE POSITIVE

There are some passages that speak approvingly about a *moderate* use of alcoholic beverages. In Deuteronomy 14, Moses tells the Israelites who are distant from the tabernacle/temple that they may change their produce into money and bring it to the tabernacle/temple and, then, he tells them how they may use that money. He says,

You may spend the money for whatever your heart

desires: for oxen, or sheep, or wine [*yayin*], or strong drink [*shekhar*], or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household. Also you shall not neglect the Levite who is in your town, for he has no portion or inheritance among you. (vv.26–27)

There is little difference in the way the two words describing drinks are translated: even the King James version renders “wine” and “strong drink.” Now, how were these beverages to be used? The Israelites were to “eat” a meal “in the presence of the Lord.” Clyde Woods calls it “a joyous sacrificial feast at the sanctuary” (242). C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch call it “a joyous meal to which the Levite was also to be invited” (367). Now, what drinks were the Israelites, and even the Levites, to consume as a part of that meal? First, “wine” [*yayin*], which generally has the potential to intoxicate if one drinks too much of it. Second, this passage approves the consumption of “strong drink [*shekhar*]” which according to nearly all definitions known to this student had the potential to intoxicate even though, as seen, it was not nearly as high in alcoholic content as modern-day “strong drinks.” The Brown, Driver, and Briggs lexicon defines *shekhar* as “intoxicating drink, strong drink . . . usually condemned [as in] Isaiah 5:11, etc., . . . [but] . . . allowable in sacrificial meals [as in] Deuteronomy 14:26 . . .” (1016). But notice its definition, “intoxicating drink.” D. Miall Edwards, in the *International Bible Encyclopedia*, agrees, saying, “There can be no doubt that *shekhar* was intoxicating. This is proved 1) from the etymology of the word, it being derived from *shakhar*, ‘to be or become drunken’ (Gen. 9:21 etc.) . . . [and] 2) from descriptions of its effects . . . (Isa. 28:7–8 etc.)” (880). Keil and Delitzsch define *shekhar* as “an intoxicating drink” (Vol. II, 354). Woods says it “designates an intoxicating

beverage” (24). And, finally, the Italian scholar, Antonio Martini, says *shekhar* is a “bevanda inebriante” (417). That is, it is an “intoxicating drink” (implied: if one drinks too much of it). One recent attempt to deny the alcoholic content of *shekhar* in this passage affirms that it is “strong” in the sense that it was “flavored” with “spices, honey and dates” and “its *taste* was thus ‘strong’” (Duke 10). This argument is less than convincing. In the first place, as noticed, wine (usually *yayin*) and strong drink (usually *shekhar*) are frequently paired in the Old Testament (as in Lev. 10:9; Num. 6:3 [twice], Deut. 14:26, 29:6; Judg. 13:4–14 [three times]; 1 Sam. 1:15; Prov. 31:4; Isa. 56:12; Mic. 2:11; KJV). As previously stated, in all cases where we can *prove* the meaning of “wine” (*yayin*), it is alcoholic. Now when you have wine (*yayin*) which is known not for its taste but for its alcoholic content, paired with another drink called “strong drink” (*shekhar*) in what sense would you expect it to be “strong”? Obviously in the alcoholic sense. In fact, in such a context, its practical meaning is “strong[er] in alcoholic content.” Secondly, as for the mixing or flavoring of alcoholic drinks with “spiced” materials, as in Song of Solomon 8:2, such generally, it seems, *added* to their alcoholic content. In fact, in Isaiah 5:22, the prophet condemns men (evidently wicked judges—see v.23) who are “heroes” in “drinking wine [*yayin*]” and in “mixing strong drink [*shekhar*].” Why is this “mixing” a part of what is condemned . . . because it was too heavily *flavored* or because it was more *heavily alcoholic* and impeded good judgment? The conservative scholar, Edward J. Young, says that here the mixing was done “So as to make more drink *more stimulating*. It was not therefore a mere mingling of water and wine. The mixing may have been with roots or spices; cf. S. of S. 8:2; Ps. 75:9; Prov. 23:30 . . .” (221; emphasis mine, EDE). J. Paterson adds that, “The ‘mingling’ or mixing of strong

drink denounced by Isaiah (5:22) has reference to the ancient practice of adding aromatic herbs and spices to the wine in order to add to its flavor and *increase its 'headiness'*. Such was the spiced wine of Song of Solomon 8:2" (1039).

Yes, the "mixing" undoubtedly added both "flavor" and "headiness" (alcoholic content) to what they drank, but the one God worried about being too "strong" was the alcoholic content. The alcoholic content was what led those judges to "justify the wicked" (Isa. 5:23). All of this to say that the "strong drink [*shekhar*]" of Deuteronomy 14:26 was undoubtedly *relatively* "strong" in the alcoholic sense and yet the Israelites, including the Levites, are encouraged to consume it (obviously in moderation) "in the presence of the Lord." This also proves that the Levites required abstention from "wine or strong drink" was limited to "when" they came "into the tent of meeting" (Lev. 10:9) to serve as priests. Yes, Deuteronomy 14:26 is one Old Testament passage where alcoholic beverages are spoken of in a positive way. And there are several others.

In Numbers 28:7 God tells Moses "you shall pour out a drink offering of strong drink [*shekhar*] to the Lord." Compare "wine" in 28:14. Even the King James Version renders "strong drink" in 28:7. The New International Version translates as "fermented drink." Now, if this "strong drink" had been *inherently* and totally evil would God have allowed it to be used in His worship? Surely not.

In Psalms 104:14–15, it is said that God causes everything on the earth to "grow" so that man may have "food" and "wine [*yayin*]" which makes man's heart glad." Like food, this "wine" is a gift of God to make "man's heart glad." As Anthony L. Ash and Clyde M. Miller say, "wine was an acceptable beverage to be used in moderation at meal time. . . ." (349). As Easton writes, "A moderate 'gladdening of the heart' was not looked upon as being at

all reprehensible" (3088).

In Proverbs 9:1–6, divine "wisdom" is even depicted as inviting fools to forsake their "folly" (v.6) and partake of her "food" and "the wine [*yayin*] I have mixed" (v.5). Adam Clarke says the "*yayin masach*, mingled wine, was . . . not mixed with water to make it weaker; but with spices and other ingredients to make it stronger" (728). Allen P. Ross adds that "the figures of meat and wine represent the *good* teaching of wisdom that will be palatable and profitable" (948). Surely if wine were totally and inherently evil the Holy Spirit would not have used it in such a positive way.

In Nehemiah 5:17–19, we read about Nehemiah who is depicted as the epitome of a God-fearing man, serving "all sorts of wine [*yayin*] . . . in abundance" on his "table" to "150 Jews and officials" and others. The King James Version also reads "all sorts of wine." To say the least, this would include, without dispute, some wines that had the potential to intoxicate. And yet immediately after mentioning these wines he served, he prays that God will bless him "for good" according to "all" that he had "done for the people" (v.19).

In Proverbs 31:6–7, after having prohibited kings from using wine when dealing with the "rights" of their subjects, the inspired writer then turns in the opposite direction and instructs God's people to "Give strong drink [*shekhar*] to him who is perishing, and wine [*yayin*] to him whose life is bitter. Let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his trouble no more." As Clarke says, "inebriating drinks were mercifully given to condemned criminals, to render them less sensible to the torture they endured in dying. This was what was offered to our Lord; but He refused it" [cf. Mark 15:23] (791). This is a positive (approved) use of strong drink/wine.

There are many other positive uses of moderate

amounts of wine and strong drink in the Old Testament but we will study only one more: Genesis 14:18–20. After Abram defeated Chedorlaomer and rescued Lot he was met, at his return, by Melchizedek.

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine [*yayin*]; now he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.”

As Edwin Jones writes, “The bread and wine brought by Melchizedek remind one of the Passover and of the Lord’s Supper. This may have been a covenant meal of solidarity between Abram and Melchizedek. The Lord’s Supper is our covenant meal with God (Lk. 22:20)” (93).

These are just some of the Old Testament passages that cast moderate usage of wine and strong drink in a positive light. Now we pass on to a discussion of the . . .

WINE OF THE PASSOVER/LORD’S SUPPER

In Exodus 12 no drink is mentioned in connection with the Passover lamb, yet, when it was observed by Jesus (Matt. 26:19–29), he drank of a “cup” and commands his disciples to “drink” of it (v.27). Its contents are described as “fruit of the vine” (v.29). There is general agreement that the “vine” is the grape vine. However, whenever we ask whether the liquid from that vine is fermented or not we get varied answers. Guy N. Woods, though he preferred unfermented grape juice, admits that the phrase “fruit of the vine” which Jesus used means that “either, therefore, may be used” in the Lord’s Supper today. He goes on to add that “to urge the use of one, to the exclusion of the other, on alleged scriptural grounds, is to make a law where God made none. It is grave sin so to do (1 Tim. 4:3)” (361). But, remember our question: Was the liquid of the Passover

“cup,” which Jesus used, fermented or not? Kerry Duke says a fermented cup is impossible because “the Jews were to remove all leaven from their dwellings in preparation for the Passover (Exod. 13:7) . . . [and] the Jews applied this commandment to beverages as well as bread is clear . . .” (3). What Duke affirms about leaven even in beverages during the Passover, is probably true. But what he seems to ignore is that at the end of the fermentation process the alcoholic content which is developed by the fermentation “kills the yeast or leaven . . . the yeast does not survive” (Crosby 2). That is, when the fermentation is complete the leavening element has been destroyed. Easton suggests that for wine, that happens “at the end of 40 days” (3087). Therefore, fully fermented wine could be used in the Passover because it contained no leaven. That is why you hear Moore affirm that “. . . the [fully] fermented juice of the grape prepared by Jews, and keep carefully *free from leaven*, is the proper Paschal wine” (2538; emphasis mine, EDE). That he is correct in that affirmation is evident from the same Jewish document which Duke quotes, the Mishnah (which is the core of the Talmud, an uninspired Jewish document the compilation of which was begun in the second century B.C.). That document, commenting on the four cups of “wine” to be drunk by each individual as a part of the Passover “meal,” says that he should *not* drink more wine “after the meal” because such additional wine “*intoxicates* and makes the person *unfit* to recite the hallel” (Hebrew-English 1084). Indeed, the “wine” used in the Passover had the potential of intoxicating if one drank too much of it. This is the “wine” of the “cup” Jesus used to institute His Supper. It is, indeed, as Everett Ferguson says, . . . we may safely conclude that the “fruit of the vine” used at the institution of the Lord’s Supper (Matt. 26:27ff, and parallels) was the normal table-drink of the Jews and other peoples of the

Mediterranean world, namely, diluted or mixed [fermented] wine. (148)

As to why Jesus used “fruit of the vine” and not wine [*oinos*] to describe the cup, it seems Moore has the proper explanation. He says,

... the Jews from time immemorial have used this phrase to designate the wine partaken of on sacred occasions, as at the Passover and on the evening of the Sabbath. The *Mishna* (De. Bened, cap. 6, pars i) expressly states, that, in pronouncing blessings, “the fruit of the vine” is the consecrated expression for *yayin*. . . . (2537)

The use of fermented wine in the Supper is one reason why some pagans could, with some thread of credibility, accuse Christians of “drunkenness” in their worship “banquet,” as the pagan Natalis did in about AD 230 (Marco Minucio Felice, 28). And it is also why, as Ferguson says, Tertullian, a Christian leader in almost the same period, is forced “to defend the soberness of the Christian love feast, Apology 39” (149). Had Christians been known to use only unfermented grape juice, such a defense would have likely been unnecessary.

J. W. McGarvey also makes it clear that he believes that the “cup” Jesus used was fermented wine when he states that Jesus’ use of “fruit of the vine” *also* allows the “use of unfermented grape juice” for those who so desire (*The Fourfold* 658). Likewise, in his comments on the miracle of the water made into wine he condemns only the “immoderate use of wine” (118).

When one asks himself how Jesus, during His earthly life, related to “wine,” he surely should deal with Matthew 11:18–19. It reads, “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous [*phagos*] man and a drunkard [*oinopotes*], a

friend of tax collectors and sinners!” John the Immerser was a Nazarite (Luke 1:15; Num. 6:1–8) and therefore, abstained from every thing associated with the grape vine as well as limiting himself to an austere diet and had little social contact. Jesus came mingling with all classes and eating normally and drinking “wine” [*oinos*]. See the inference of Jesus at Luke 7:34 that he did drink “wine [*oinos*].” Note also that the term for “drunkard” (*oinopotes*) in Matthew 11:19, which is a part of the false charge against Jesus, is a cognate of wine/*oinos*. As Harold Fowler says,

While it is true that the most unreasonable charges can be leveled against a man who has no dealings at all with that on which the charges are supposedly based, yet there has to be some shred of truth (however badly distorted) that makes the charge even credible. If the “wine” here referred to is merely a non-alcoholic beverage, then what is the point of calling Jesus “a soft-drink man”? After all, the *oinos* of Lk. 7:33, which Jesus says He drinks, and the *oinos* of *oinopotes* in Mt. 11:19, of which the slanderers say He takes too much, is the same *oinos*. (722–23)

This, again, adds to the evidence that it is not at all out of character for Jesus to use fermented wine in the Lord’s Supper.

Still another passage which confirms the use of fermented wine in the Lord’s Supper is 1 Corinthians 11:21. It reads, “. . . for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk [*methuei*].” McGarvey says “drunk” here likely “. . . indicates a state of partial intoxication . . . the context suggests that one had more than was good for him, and the other less, and there is a subtle innuendo in the crossing of the terms, so that *overdrinking* stands in contrast to

undereating . . .” (*Standard Bible* 115). Carl Holladay agrees saying, “there is no reason” *not* to take “hungry” and “drunk” at face value, that is “literally” (148).

Yes, Paul severely rebukes the Corinthians for this Corinthian version of the Lord’s Supper. Richard Oster reminds us that,

Paul had already indicated to his readers that drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:10). The excessive volume of wine often consumed at Greco-Roman banquets and meals was even commented upon by pagan moralists. One of the jobs of banquet organizers and supervisors in antiquity was to regulate the amount of wine consumed (cf. John 2:9, the master of the banquet). (279)

So, he gives many instructions as to what they should do to make that Supper acceptable to the Lord, but one is completely lacking! As someone aptly wrote, he does not tell them “to switch to grape juice” (*Understanding* 11)! Why didn’t he tell them Jesus never drank any fermented drink and certainly would not approve of such in the Lord’s Supper? The answer is, obviously, because that is not true.

PAUL’S TEACHING ON WINE IN 1 TIMOTHY

So with all of this background material, which Paul, the Jew, knew better than we, how are we to interpret what he wrote about “wine” in First Timothy at 3:8 and 5:23? We will consider them in reverse order.

1 Timothy 5:23

In this passage Paul writes to his young friend, who is an evangelist, saying, “No longer drink water exclusively but use a little wine [*oinos*] for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.” We have already defined “wine/*oinos*” as being “fermented juice of the grape”

(Bauer 701). Some would deny that it always means “fermented” liquid, but even those who would, for the most part, admit that in this passage the “wine” is fermented. And why so? Brian Kenyon, though opposed to any non-medicinal use of alcoholic beverages, gives several reasons why he believes the “wine” here spoken of is alcoholic. Among them is the fact that Timothy would have had “plenty of reasons” to abstain “from alcoholic wine” but none “to abstain from grape juice” (2). One might also wonder, if it were just grape juice, why would Paul limit him to taking just “a little”? And as A. T. Robertson says, “the emphasis is on *oligoi* (a little)” (590). Why couldn’t Timothy drink “a lot”? Obviously, because it is fermented “wine.” Nothing else makes sense in this context. But why does Paul instruct him to drink “wine”?

Because Timothy had a “stomach” problem and it was related to drinking “water” exclusively. David Williams gives some evidence that the city of Ephesus, where Timothy lived (1:3), had water purification problems in that period of time (101). And evidently Paul knew that, as Craig Keener says, the alcoholic content of wine “was often helpful in settling stomachs and preventing dysentery (it disinfected water)” (619). Further, it can also be properly deduced that Timothy had refrained from using said “wine” because of a fear of either causing others to “stumble” (cf. 1 Cor. 8:13) or, possibly, a fear of being criticized by others (cf. Luke 7:34). But Paul tells Timothy that his need for limited amounts of fermented “wine,” to protect his health, is greater than any eventual negative consequences. Carl Spain rightly suggests that, “Timothy’s ministry may have been seriously hindered by his ‘frequent ailments’ that were due to his drinking the water” (93).

Notice several legitimate deductions from this passage.

1) Here is at least one case in which a Christian can drink “a little” of an alcoholic beverage, on a regular, on-

going basis, with God's approval. However, the basis of the approval here accorded is the medicinal value of the wine.

2) Fermented "wine" is not inherently, totally evil. Up to this point, we have seen at least two positive uses in the New Testament: in the Lord's Supper for the congregation which opts to use it so, and now, this medicinal usage.

3) Some of the arguments we have made against its use are frivolous and invalid. For example, the one which says "If it takes five drinks to make you drunk then, with one you are one-fifth drunk!" Using such "logic" each time Timothy took a "little wine," then he would have been "a little drunk" by following Paul's instruction!

Another frivolous argument we have thrown around is "drunkenness begins with the first drop of the fiery liquid." And that *is* a quote from a magazine widely circulated in our brotherhood, but I will refrain from documenting it because I don't want to embarrass beloved brethren. In fact, however, if such were true, then you would have Paul, in this passage, instructing a young preacher to become "a little drunk" each time he needs a drink of water! Further, every person who takes fermented wine in the Lord's Supper, which most would agree the Lord left as an option, would be "a little intoxicated"! How did we ever come to accept such flawed logic?

Let's study this argument a bit further because it is frequently employed by our brethren. It is based on the Greek verb *methusko* which is used in passages like 1 Thessalonians 5:7. That passage reads, "those who get drunk [*methuskomenoi*] are drunk [*methousin*] at night" (NKJV). Now the argument goes something like this: Since each drink of getting drunk [*methusko*] leads to drunkenness [*methousin*] then after one drink you are already "one drink drunk;" or one brother even wrote (as in the above-given quote), "drunkenness begins with the first drop"! By way of response, Robertson sums up the wisdom

of the lexicons by saying of the two Greek words: the first (*methusko*) “means to get drunk” and the other [*methuo*] means to “be drunk” (35). That is, one describes the *process* of becoming drunk and the other describes the *state* of being drunk. In view of those definitions, let’s evaluate the argument.

Sometimes the Scriptures pair up “drunkenness and gluttony.” For example, Proverbs 23:21 reads, “For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty” (KJV). Now, that does not mean gluttony and drunkenness are alike in every sense, but they are in the sense that they both lead to “poverty” as well as in the fact that each describes an excess of something. Now, if you accept the argument that drunkenness happens at five drinks and say that taking one drink makes you “one drink drunk,” that is, already in the *state* of drunkenness, then that has consequences. That is, if five pieces of chicken make you a glutton, then when you have eaten one piece, that makes you “one piece a glutton”; that is, already in the *state* of gluttony and therefore in sin! If the first is true, there is no way of avoiding the second! What foolishness! The problem is the failure to distinguish between the *process* and the *state*. Now, it should be admitted that there may be difficulty at times in telling exactly where the *process* ends and the *state* begins. In fact, in the past, various States of our Union have disagreed on exactly where to set the line between *sober* and *drunken* driving. But now, fortunately, all States have recently agreed to set the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) for *adult* drivers of *private* vehicles at 0.08%. However, the line is set at 0.04% for drivers of *commercial* vehicles (dmv.org). But, that uncertainty about the exact line does not justify one in affirming that all of the *process* (first “drop” or “drink”) equals drunkenness/sin! We may not know the exact lines between hot and cold temperatures either, but that doesn’t justify one in saying that one degree

above zero is “one degree hot”!

1 Timothy 3:8

Here, in giving the qualifications for a deacon, Paul says he must not be “addicted [*prosechontas*] to much [*pollo*] wine [*oinos*].” The “wine” here is obviously fermented, else why would the apostle care about it if the deacon drank “much” of it? If it had been unfermented grape juice surely he could have drunk a couple of gallons daily without it disqualifying him. That it is fermented is also attested to by the fact that one could be “addicted” to it. Bauer’s lexicon defines *prosechontas* (“addicted”) as “to continue in close attention to something, occupy oneself with, devote or apply oneself to something” (880). Therefore, “addicted” is a valid translation. In fact, Thayer’s lexicon defines the term as “to be given or addicted to *oinos*, 1 Tim. 3:8” (546).

Now the question we must ask ourselves is: What is prohibited here, *use* or *abuse* of wine? Is “addiction” use or abuse? The answer should be obvious, but to some it isn’t. McGuiggan says it has to be a prohibition of any *use* of alcohol, because alcohol in all forms is unlawful and “there can be no moderate use of the unlawful” (126). But we have just proven that not all use is “unlawful.” See 1 Timothy 5:23 and the fact that Christ at least left the door open to its use in the Lord’s Supper. So McGuiggan can’t prove that it is “unlawful.” Wayne Jackson, on the other hand, while opposed to what some call “social drinking,” makes this well-balanced comment on our passage: “Some common wines in the first century had mild fermentation, thus frequently diluted with water; such was not to be consumed *in quantity*” (452; emphasis mine, EDE). He clearly believes Paul was prohibiting the abuse. But McGuiggan is quick to respond (citing the KJV in the last part of 1 Tim. 3:8) and affirming that not “greedy of filthy

lucre' doesn't imply approval of a moderate degree of desire for it" (127). Is that really so? "Greedy of filthy lucre" is the translation of one Greek word: *aischrokerdeis*. Bauer's lexicon defines it as meaning "shamelessly greedy for money" (29). Now, if one replaces the shameless greed with a "moderate degree of desire" for money, is that wrong? Jesus evidently approved the "master" who told the one-talent man that he should have "put my money in the bank" so the master would have "received" his "money back with interest" (Matt. 25:27). Evidently Jesus thought it was alright to have a "moderate degree of desire" for money. Why do we wind up manipulating and even twisting Scripture to try to justify our previously conceived position? What has made us so prone to do that, especially on this issue? We have, in churches of Christ, generally done better reasoning than characterizes us on this topic.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

A study called "Understanding the Use of Wine in the Lord's Supper," done by the Trinity Presbyterian Church of Crofton, MD, gives rather good evidence of the great influence of the Temperance Movement on the use of grape juice instead of fermented wine in the Lord's Supper. It says,

It is crucial in this discussion that we understand what cultural phenomena took place in the mid to late 19th century American church which brought about the massive shift from using wine to grape juice in the Lord's Supper. We say "cultural phenomena" because, as history shows, it was not exegesis of Scripture that enacted the change but rather social and political forces.

Many scholars and records note that in the early

19th century alcohol abuse rose sharply in America. Due to some odd theories back then which viewed even hard alcohol as a stimulant (and as something recommended for use on the job in many industries) as well as the fact that innovations had made the manufacture and sale of hard liquor much more accessible, it is hardly surprising that a great deal of abuse resulted.

Many concerned voices spoke up and began advocating temperance, initially in the form of stemming the tide against the abuse of alcohol. However, very quickly this morphed into a demand for the total abstinence from any and all alcohol. The man most associated with getting the Temperance Movement off the ground was Lyman Beecher [1775–1863]. He was a Congregationalist minister (who served in a few Presbyterian churches as well) he was very influenced by Charles Finney and was an ardent supporter of the Arminian revivals that were sweeping through much of the mid-Atlantic and New England. Many have noted the fact that he saw how revivalism was a powerful force for social change and began linking his desire for total abstinence from alcohol to these revivals. (*Understanding* 14–15)

This movement eventually helped to fuel the drive to ratify the 18th Amendment to our Constitution, which happened in 1919, and led to the period known as Prohibition (1919–1933). Now, it is not my purpose to try to evaluate the effects of Prohibition on our society. I would note, however, that from about 1840 to 1935 or so, our society was characterized by a lot of white-hot rhetoric on the use of alcohol and all of us know that such rhetoric often produces more heat than light. My fear is that some of us have allowed our position on alcohol to be influenced by the rhetoric that came indirectly from Protestant preachers

like Beecher, rather than from a calm restudy of all Bible passages on the subject. I believe I was, without realizing it, so influenced until I restudied the issue several years ago. One question I have asked myself is, "Why haven't we done the same amount of teaching against being a 'glutton' (Prov. 23:21; cf. Deut. 21:20) when the Bible is clear about gluttony being sinful?" And is there any doubt that gluttony and the resulting obesity does great harm to many people? Listen to this report from Harvard University:

Apart from tobacco, there is perhaps no greater harm to the collective health in the U.S. than obesity. Worldwide, too, obesity's health effects are deep and vast—and they have a real and lasting impact on communities, on nations, and most importantly, on individuals, today and across future generations.

In the U.S., among adults under the age of 70, obesity is second only to tobacco in the number of deaths it causes each year. As tobacco use continues to decline, and obesity rates continue to rise, the number of deaths due to obesity may soon exceed that of tobacco.

Like tobacco, obesity causes or is closely linked with a large number of health conditions, including heart disease, stroke, diabetes, high blood pressure, unhealthy cholesterol, asthma, sleep apnea, gallstones, kidney stones, infertility, and as many as 11 types of cancers, including leukemia, breast, and colon cancer. No less real are the social and emotional side effects of obesity, including discrimination, lower wages, lower quality of life and a likely susceptibility to depression. (*Obesity Consequences* 1)

In fact, another study done by Stanford Health Care estimates there are in the U.S. currently "300,000 premature deaths . . . each year" due to obesity (*Effects* 1).

In comparison, the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse estimates that currently "88,000 people die from alcohol-related causes annually" in the U.S. (*Alcohol Facts* 1).

Can there be any doubt that at least as many church members (and others) sin in this area as in the abuse of alcohol? Why have we not preached (and written) as much on this as on the abuse of alcohol? Is it because some of us have been more influenced by certain Protestant preachers than by a study of the Bible itself? God help us to avoid that pitfall!

But, be that as it may, since I have restudied the "alcohol question," what do I believe about so-called "social drinking"?

WHAT ABOUT SOCIAL DRINKING?

If I were ever to be invited to a "social gathering" the main purpose of which was to drink alcoholic beverages, I would *not* go. If I am invited to a gathering like my recent high school class reunion where drinks are available at a side table (and a few drink) I would go, but *not* drink. In fact, I did just that. Plus, since I had been president of the class, I was asked to speak and I did some "preaching" about preparing for a "better life." If at such a gathering people were "tipsy" to the point of being "rowdy," I would leave. I do not participate in what is generally called "social drinking" and I advise others to avoid it.

However, wishing to be perfectly candid, I would not tell a Christian who decides to go against my advice and drink small amounts of alcohol, maybe in his own home, that he has sinned with the first drink, though I would tell him he runs a greater risk of sinning.

BUT WHY AVOID "SOCIAL DRINKING"?

Someone will ask *why* avoid it if you believe some consumption is not always sinful. Once again, I would

remind us that the beverages we have are generally much higher in alcoholic content and are, therefore, more damaging. Thus, I believe many more people do sin because of alcoholic beverages today than in the first century. And I wish to emulate the attitude Paul manifested when he wrote about meats offered to idols, "If food [or drink] cause my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat [or drink alcohol]" (1 Cor. 8:13).

Second, though I am fully convinced of the correctness of the position I have taken, there are many *good* brethren who do not agree with me and I do not wish to lack in respect for any of them, so I will always abstain.

DOES THIS POSITION NOT ENDANGER, ESPECIALLY YOUNG PEOPLE?

I have not been in the habit, as a preacher or Bible professor, of taking positions either because they are popular or unpopular. Most who know me have heard me oppose popular trends. If I know my own heart, I have always taken positions because I believe they are Scriptural and let the "chips" fall where they may. If my position is Scriptural, and I believe it is, then *God* is responsible for how it affects both young and old and not the teacher. Frankly, I could wish God had just plainly said, "Don't ever drink anything alcoholic, even for medicinal purposes," but he didn't. And then upon more sober reflection, I remember he always knows better than I what is best. When I preach on giving, I sometimes wish he had plainly said "Every Christian must give at least 10%," but he didn't! Evidently he knew it was better not to do so. Maybe with more liberty I am more apt to grow in love.

One more thing regarding our fears about young people: I suspect more have left the Lord because of our ill-advised efforts to force the Bible to say that "one drink makes you one drink drunk," than have ever left him

because of drinking alcohol! Our young people are not foolish! They catch on when we play “fast and loose” with the Bible.

CONCLUSION

D. Miall Edwards (no relation to me) wrote what I believe will form an excellent conclusion to this study. He said,

The condition of the modern world has given rise to problems which were not within the horizon of NT writers. The habit of excessive drinking has spread enormously among the common people, owing largely to the cheapening of alcoholic drinks. The fact that the evil exists today in greater proportions may call for a drastic remedy and a special crusade. But rather than defend total abstinence by a false or forced exegesis, it were better to admit that the principle is not formally laid down in the NT, while maintaining that there are broad principles enunciated, which in view of modern conditions should lead to voluntary abstinence from all intoxicants. (881)

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