



## FIRST-PERSON: Alcohol & the church (part 2)

By Peter Lumpkins

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second column in a three-part series on alcohol and the church.*

CARROLLTON, Ga. (BP)--Southern Baptists are conservative Christians, and conservative Christians take very seriously the profound significance of God's Word, the Bible. Indeed we believe the Bible to be our ultimate authority for faith (spiritual belief) and practice (ethical behavior).

These assumptions, coupled with our understanding of biblical inspiration popularly known as "inerrancy" remain fundamental to biblical interpretation. In fact, sober hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) becomes a non-negotiable enterprise to all conservative believers. Why? If the Bible is God's Word written, then it becomes incalculably necessary to ensure we interpret His flawless Word as accurately as humanly possible. And, while no guarantee exists that fallible human beings may interpret the infallible Scriptures with infallible results, we nonetheless both openly welcome and enthusiastically pursue sound hermeneutics designed to expose fallacious interpretations of the Word of God.



**Peter Lumpkins**

So, what does hermeneutics have to do with what the New Testament says about wine and wine-drinking? I think Robert H. Stein, a senior professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, ably answered this question in a short article published in Christianity Today several years ago entitled "Wine-drinking in New Testament Times" (June 1975). At the time, Dr. Stein was serving as associate professor of New Testament at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minn.

Stein explains the role sound hermeneutics plays not only in understanding what the Bible would say about wine-drinking, but also what role sound hermeneutics plays in answering what the Bible says to us about any subject today. He writes: "The basic principle of hermeneutics.... is that the question 'What does it [the Bible] mean for us today?' must be preceded by the question 'What did it mean for them yesterday?'" In other words, it becomes next to impossible to discern intelligently what God says to us now without first grasping what the text originally meant when written thousands of years ago to a people living in a culture far removed from ours. Such caution applies whether we are speaking of wine-drinking or any number of behaviors we could name.

Dr. Stein moves on to consider the ancient practice of wine-making, including its preservation and consumption. Interestingly, Stein playfully asks rhetorical questions from his reader's standpoint: "Is he going to try to tell us that wine in the Bible means grape juice? Is he going to try to say that the wine

mentioned in the New Testament is any different from the wine bottled today ...?" Stein answers, "no and yes: No, the wine of the Bible was not unfermented grape juice. Yes, it was different from the wine of today." (For the record, the reader needs to understand that while I wholeheartedly agree with Dr. Stein's profound contribution toward and historical analysis of wine-making, preservation, and consumption in general, there exists evidence not covered by Dr. Stein which led me personally to believe that the varieties of wine in the ancient world did, in fact, essentially include what the professor called "unfermented grape juice," a subject I pursued in a book-length monograph.)

Even so, Professor Stein summarily describes the ancient practice of wine-keeping and wine-drinking. The custom included storing the juice (or sometimes other fruits) in "large pointed jugs" called amphorae. From there, the wine was dispensed into kraters, or, what we would call large bowls, "where it was mixed with water." It is significant to note that the bowls were definitively for mixing the wine, not for drinking the wine. Wine was served as a drink in a cup called a kylix. We also note the kylix was not used to get the wine straight from the amphorae (large jugs). To do so would be called, in ancient times, a "Scythian" or "barbaric" practice. Indeed, as Stein rightly points out, even the Greeks viewed drinking unmixed wine as fool's play. As for the ratios of mixture goes, some sources recommended 20:1 (20 parts water to 1 part wine), while the most common appeared to be about 3:1 (3 parts water, 1 part wine).

We emphasize once again, the custom when consuming fermented wine in the New Testament era was always to consume mixed wine. Stein concludes: "The ratio of water might vary, but only barbarians drank it unmixed, and a mixture of wine and water of equal parts (1:1) was seen as "'strong drink' and frowned upon."

So, just what difference does the ancient practice of wine-making, preservation and consumption have on our understanding of the New Testament? For one thing, whenever we see the term "wine" employed in the New Testament, an interpretative flag should accompany our thoughts. For example, while there are other Greek words in the New Testament which are translated "wine" in our English Bibles, the most often used word is "oinos" (e.g John 2:3, 9, 10; 4:46). Hear carefully Dr. Stein's conclusion concerning the term "wine" (oinos) as we find it in the New Testament: "The term 'wine' or oinos in the ancient world, then, did not mean wine as we understand it today but wine mixed with water." It was, he argues, the "safest and easiest method of making the water safe to drink."

If Dr. Stein is correct, those who insist upon biblical neutrality concerning the moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages today are not reading the New Testament from the perspective of what the text meant to the original recipients. In other words, they skip what Professor Stein indicated was a fundamental question in sound biblical hermeneutics: "What did it [the Bible] mean for them yesterday?" In essence, if the Bible meant by "wine" to convey "wine mixed with water," this has profound implications on precisely how we are to both interpret and apply the biblical text toward our behavior today.

For example, in Part 1 of this series we noted that given our contemporary production of alcoholic beverages, we may conclude "alcohol is alcohol is alcohol." By that we mean that same amount of alcohol exists in our standard drinks, whether it's a 12 ounce can of beer, a 5 ounce glass of wine, or a 1.5 ounce shot of bourbon. Comparing today's drinks with a kylix (cup) of wine in ancient times, Stein argues, is wrong.

"To consume the amount of alcohol that is in two martinis by drinking wine containing three parts water to one part wine, one would have to drink over twenty-two glasses," he writes. "In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts water, but one's drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind."

Hence, if those among us today continue to insist on biblical neutrality toward the moderate consumption of alcohol, we must insist they not overlook the more fundamental question: Is today's beverage about which they argue for moral consumption the same beverage we find on the ancient pages of the New Testament? We think not.

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