

Wine Is A Blessing

Throughout my life, nearly every church that I've ever attended has condemned the consumption of alcohol. Some churches even had covenants posted in the foyer which required all members to “abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drink as a beverage”. If you drank alcohol you weren't welcome. Many churches have consistently depicted alcohol as an evil thing that should *never* be consumed by Christians under any circumstances. That's why when those churches serve communion it's always with grape juice and never with wine.

I think it would be wise to take some time and explore what the Bible teaches about alcohol. After studying the Scriptures I've become convinced that what it has to say is very different from what many churches teach. I suspect that many Christians would be shocked to learn that Isaiah 65:8 calls wine a *blessing* – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Drunkenness Is Prohibited

The first point I want to make is that the Bible strongly and repeatedly condemns drunkenness. For example, consider this passage:

Proverbs 23:29-35: “Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, when it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart

shall utter perverse things. Yeah, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.”

This person is so drunk that other people are literally *beating him* and he doesn't feel it! He has no idea what's going on or what he's doing. He's so addicted to alcohol that it's utterly ruined his life. This sort of drunkenness is *strongly* condemned.

Here's another verse that speaks against drunkenness:

Proverbs 20:1: “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.”

This verse tells us that those who are deceived by strong drink (meaning those who get drunk) aren't wise. Getting drunk is a terrible thing. In fact, the book of Proverbs says that kings shouldn't drink wine because of what might happen if they get drunk:

Proverbs 31:4-6: “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.”

The kings of the ancient world had absolute power. For that reason it was critical for them to be sober at all times. If they were drunk then they might use their power to do something terrible. That's why it was better to give wine to those who were

poor. To them wine would be comforting because it would temporarily cause them to forget their poverty and misery. (How much wine do you think you'd have to drink before you forgot something like that?)

I've never heard a pastor mention the second half of this passage. Yet it's there in the Bible! Since poverty is harsh and miserable, it's actually a good thing for the poor to drink wine so they can forget their suffering for a while and achieve some level of happiness. I realize this is a shocking thing to say. You can go back and read the text if you want, but that's really what it says.

This is our first clue that the Bible's stance on wine is more complicated than “no one should ever drink wine under any circumstances, period”.

Christ Drank Wine

The next point is a critical one. The Bible establishes beyond a doubt that Christ drank wine. Anyone who tells you otherwise is being dishonest with the text. For example:

Matthew 11:18-19: “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.”

Jesus pointed out that the Pharisees condemned John the Baptist for *not* drinking wine, and they condemned Jesus *for* drinking wine. That's the only possible interpretation of this passage. John the Baptist didn't drink alcohol but Jesus did. Since Jesus never sinned, that means drinking alcohol can't be a sin. The sin is *getting drunk*.

We know for a fact that Jesus drank wine because that's what He served at the last supper when He celebrated communion with His disciples. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 11:21 the apostle Paul

once condemned the way the Corinthians were celebrating communion because some people were getting drunk! I've never seen anyone get drunk on grape juice. The fact that people were getting drunk means the church was serving wine.

I find it interesting that when Paul confronted the Corinthian church he didn't tell them it was wrong to serve wine and they should be using grape juice instead. Instead he told them to treat communion in a holy manner and stop getting drunk. Paul could easily have told them to start serving grape juice but he didn't. Paul also didn't say "Since some people in the congregation are tempted by wine, it's best to not use wine at all." This sort of reasoning is very common in modern churches, but Paul didn't teach that. Even though some people in the Corinthian church were literally *getting drunk during the service*, Paul *still* didn't use that excuse to forbid alcohol in church!

There's also the fact that in Christ's first miracle He turned water into wine. The wine that He made was of an exceptionally high quality:

John 2:9-10: "When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, and saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now."

Why did people set out the good wine first? Because after the guests had been drinking for days (which was what happened at ancient wedding feasts) the quality of the wine stopped mattering. Jesus literally gave more wine to people who were already pretty inebriated! There aren't many modern churches that would bring more wine to a group that had been drinking for days, but that's what Jesus did.

As an aside, let's not pretend that Jesus made grape juice. There's a perfectly good Greek word for grape juice and it's not used in any of these passages. Claiming that Jesus supplied the wedding guests with grape juice is dishonest. That's not what the text says.

Turning Tithes Into Wine

But that's not all. In the book of Deuteronomy there's a very interesting passage which tells the Israelites what to do if they're too far away from the tabernacle to bring their tithes. What it says is very relevant to this topic:

Deuteronomy 14:24-26: “And if the way be too long for thee, so that thou art not able to carry it; or if the place be too far from thee, which the Lord thy God shall choose to set his name there, when the Lord thy God hath blessed thee: Then shalt thou turn it into money, and bind up the money in thine hand, and shalt go unto the place which the Lord thy God shall choose: and thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the Lord thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household,”

Under the Mosaic law the tithe was to be paid in crops and livestock. However, if you lived far away from the tabernacle then it might not be practical to transport your animals there. In that case you God commanded you to turn your tithe into money and use it to throw a big feast for your household. The passage specifically says that you could spend the money on *wine or strong drink*.

If it was a sin to drink wine then I'm pretty sure the

Mosaic Law wouldn't have told people to use their tithe money to buy “strong drink” for their household! God clearly thought that it was fine as long as people didn't abuse wine and get drunk.

You may be thinking that perhaps this wine had been heavily watered down. The reason we know that's not the case is because the book of Isaiah says that mixing water with wine actually *pollutes* it and makes it worse:

Isaiah 1:21: “How is the faithful city become an harlot! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers. Thy silver is become dross, thy wine mixed with water: thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth gifts, and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them.”

Remember, when Jesus turned water into wine the lord of the feast said the water which Christ had made was the best wine that had been served so far. That rules out wine which had been watered down!

Wine Is A Blessing

There are a number of times in the Bible where God says that wine is a blessing that He gives to people. For example:

Proverbs 3:10: “So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.”

Isaiah 65:8: “Thus saith the Lord, as the new wine is found in the cluster, and one saith, Destroy it not; for a blessing is in it: so will I do

for my servants' sakes, that I may not destroy them all."

As you can see, God said that wine was a blessing. There were also times when God cursed people by *withholding* wine:

Joel 1:10: "The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted: the new wine is dried up, the oil languisheth."

Isaiah 24:7: "The new wine mourneth, the vine languisheth, all the merryhearted do sigh."

God even promised that one of the blessings of life in the millennium will be an abundance of wine:

Joel 3:18: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down new wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the rivers of Judah shall flow with waters, and a fountain shall come forth out of the house of the Lord, and shall water the valley of Shittim."

Why would God do this? Because wine is a blessing as long as it's not abused:

Psalm 4:7: "Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased."

Psalm 104:15: "And wine that maketh glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengtheneth man's heart."

Zechariah 9:17: "For how great is his goodness, and how great is his beauty! corn shall make the

young men cheerful, and new wine the maids.”

Once again, there's a perfectly good word for grape juice that could have been used if that's what these passages were talking about. However, *that word wasn't used*. These passages mean exactly what they say.

What's Going On?

In order to understand what's going on I think it's best to compare it to sex. The Bible *strongly* condemns having sex outside of marriage. In fact, under the Mosaic Law adultery was punished by death. That's how serious it was! The New Testament tells us that fornicators will not inherit the kingdom of God. Abusing sex by having it outside of marriage is a terrible sin.

However, there's nothing wrong with having sex *within* marriage. Hebrews 13:4 says “marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.” In 1 Corinthians 7:1-5 the apostle Paul said that couples should limit the time they spend fasting and praying so they can have time for sex (so they don't become tempted to have sex *outside* of marriage). It's true there are many passages in Proverbs that condemn having sex outside of marriage. There's also the Song of Solomon, which talks about what a blessing it is to have sex *within* marriage.

The Bible teaches that sex can either be a blessing or a terrible sin depending on how it's used. If it's used within the boundaries which God has set then it's a great thing. If it's used sinfully then it can damage your health (through disease), destroy your life (in many ways), and even drag your soul down to Hell (if you never repent). It may seem like the safest thing to do is to just forbid everyone from ever having sex. However, those who forbid marriage and require everyone to be celibate are teaching heresy. 1 Timothy 4:1 calls that a doctrine of devils!

Those who have no interest in getting married, and who would rather pursue a different path in life, aren't doing anything

wrong. The choice about whether or not to pursue marriage is left up to each individual.

Wine works the same way. It's a terrible sin to abuse wine, just as it's a terrible sin to abuse sex. However, if wine is used within the limits that God has set (meaning, don't get drunk) then the Bible calls it a blessing. It's something God has given to gladden people's heart. Condemning all use of alcohol on the grounds that some people might abuse it is no different from demanding lifelong celibacy from everyone because some people are fornicators and adulterers. That's going way too far.

There are some people who aren't interested in getting married, and who willingly choose a path of celibacy because that's what they prefer. There's nothing wrong with that. Likewise, there are some people who don't drink wine because they have no interest in it. That's fine as well.

However, it's *not* fine when people who are celibate stand up and condemn those who chose to get married. That's a doctrine of devils. Likewise, it's not fine when those who don't drink condemn those who drink responsibly. It's a sin to engage in drunkenness *but it's not a sin to drink*. Likewise, it's a sin to commit adultery but it's not a sin to have sex with your wife. Churches should only condemn what the Bible condemns and not go beyond what it teaches.

I've seen many churches which have covenants on their wall that condemns those who drink wine or distribute it to others. Those covenants horrify me because they actually exclude Jesus from the church. After all, He both drank wine and distributed it to others! Under the terms of that covenant the Lord Jesus Christ wouldn't be welcome, would He?