

Should Christians Drink Alcohol?

Most evangelicals and a growing number in fundamentalism allow for a drink (or a lot more than a little) now and then.

Our culture sees the drinking of alcoholic beverages as natural and accepted. How does a Christian live in his culture? Should he adapt to the culture, seek to change the culture, be monastically separate from the culture, or be holy in the culture?

I. Introduction

A. The Issue Considered From The Past

1. For Baptists this was not even an issue. To be sure, men such as Luther and Calvin enjoyed and recommended the use of alcoholic beverages, but their ability as theologians does not guarantee infallibility. Remember, Luther believed in the baptism of infants, and Calvin in the execution of heretics.
2. POINT: historically those who have held our doctrinal positions and convictions about how a Christians lives a godly life in this sinful world have maintained that Christians should not touch a drop of liquor.

B. The Issue Considered Today

1. Christians In The Culture

- Refer to beginning notes *above*.

2. Missionaries On Foreign Fields

- a. I have heard and no doubt you have too, of missionaries who are under pressure to partake of a glass of wine at a meal *because it is the cultural thing to do*. Some have given in on this, others haven't.
- b. POINT: what if it was the cultural thing to have a puff of marijuana? After all, "a little puff won't hurt you, and in fact used moderately in small quantities it can actually have medical benefit." The point here is that *cultural practices should not be allowed to dictate issues of moral importance*.

C. The Importance Of This Issue: Christian Liberty

1. There are two main sides to this debate: those who say that it is okay in moderation, and others who say that abstinence is the biblical position.
2. Is this an area of "Christian liberty"? This is the attempt to say that because of the believer's freedom in Christ, he is no longer under the restraints of the Law.
3. From the Bible we see this applied only to two situations: (1) food sacrificed to idols and (2) the observance of days.

- a. In the first case the knowledge that something was sacrificed to idols was still "too big to swallow" for some Christians, even though in reality the idol is nothing. The believer *does* have the freedom to eat such meat, but he has the responsibility not to cause his brother to stumble.
 - b. In the second case, observing days, a new believer might really have a big hang up about this, so much so that if he does/doesn't, he feels that he is in sin. The believer *does* have the freedom to use the days God gives him as he sees fit, but he has the responsibility not to cause his brother to stumble in such matters--it just isn't worth it.
4. For the issue at hand, are alcoholic beverages to be classified in with these things as an area where a Christian *does* have the freedom to partake of it, but he has the *responsibility* not to cause his brother to stumble?
 - The answer is NO. A hotdog sacrificed to Baal is still a hotdog; if someone has it in their head that if they don't have their devotions at 4:00 AM, they're in sin, that's okay, you can still be in bed. But when it comes to alcoholic beverages, we're left the realm of hotdogs and 4:00 AM and entered into something where the item under consideration *does* have an effect on you, regardless of what you may think about it.
 5. The issue is complicated because of two things: (1) The Bible often speaks of alcoholic beverages, mainly wine, in a positive light. (2) A lot has changed since Jesus' day, and this includes wine.

II. What Does The Bible Say About Alcoholic Beverages And The Character Of Christians?

A. What Does The Bible Say About Alcoholic Beverages

1. Wine

- Grape Juice Or Alcohol?
 - 1) One way in which some have tried to see the Bible teach total abstinence from all alcoholic beverages and to deal with the positive statements it also says about wine is to say that such positive statements only refer to grape juice. Problems: 1 Cor 11:20-21; 1 Tim 3:3, 8
 - 2) One argument runs thus: wine in the Bible was not fermented, because that introduces leaven, and why would the Lord allow leaven to be in the Passover? Note 1 Cor 11:20-21 "therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk." This was wrong and brought God's judgment on them, 11:30, but "if they were drunk at communion, then the wine must have been fermented" (Geisler, p. 49).
 - 3) "All wine mentioned in the Bible is fermented grape juice with an alcohol content. No non-fermented drink was called wine."¹

¹ *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, s.v., "Wine," p. 870.

- 4) “Strong drink was a fermented beverage not made from the grapes but from barley and was more akin to beer.”²

2. Uses

- a. It is a gift from God, Psa 104:15 “And wine which makes man’s heart glad, So that he may make *his* face glisten with oil, And food which sustains man’s heart.”
- b. Medicinal use
 - 1) Prov 31:6 “give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter.” Here they seems to function as a relaxant or sedative.
 - 2) Luke 10:34 “and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on *them*”
 - 3) 1 Tim 5:23 “No longer drink water *exclusively*, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.”
- c. Used to represent the Lord’s Blood, Luke 22:18 “I will not drink of the fruit of the vine from now on until the kingdom of God comes”
- d. Characterized as abundant during the millennial kingdom, Joel 2:24 “the vats will overflow with the new wine and oil”
- e. Daily meals
 - 1) Judg 19:19 “Yet there is both straw and fodder for our donkeys, and also bread and wine for me, your maidservant, and the young man who is with your servants; there is no lack of anything.”
 - 2) 1 Sam 16:20 “Jesse took a donkey *loaded with* bread and a jug of wine and a young goat, and sent *them* to Saul by David his son.”
 - 3) Luke 7:33-34 “33 “For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon!’ 34 “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”
- f. Water purifier
 - This will be covered below, but briefly: there was no refrigeration or water purifying methods as we have today, and wine was used to purify water and make it safe to drink.
- g. Used by important persons
 - 1) Jesus made wine (John 2:1-11) and drank it (Matt 11:18-19).
 - 2) Prospective pastors and deacons are characterized as being "not addicted to wine" and "not addicted to much wine" (1 Tim 3:3, 8). Implication: prospective pastors and deacons of Paul’s day used the wine of their day.

² *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, s.v., “Wine,” p. 870.

3. Drunkenness

- a. Gen 9:21 “He drank of the wine and became drunk”
- b. Prov 20:1 “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.” (NIV)
- c. Prov 23:29-35 “29 Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? 30 Those who linger long over wine, Those who go to taste mixed wine. 31 Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it goes down smoothly; 32 At the last it bites like a serpent And stings like a viper. 33 Your eyes will see strange things And your mind will utter perverse things. 34 And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea, Or like one who lies down on the top of a mast 35 ‘They struck me, *but* I did not become ill; They beat me, *but* I did not know *it*. When shall I awake? I will seek another drink.’”
- d. Hos 4:11 “harlotry, wine, and new wine take away the understanding.” Here used in connection with marital and spiritual immorality
- e. Rom 13:13 “Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.”
- f. Gal 5:21 “envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”
- g. Eph 5:18 “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit,”
- h. 1 Tim 3:3, 8 “not addicted to wine...not given to much wine”
- i. 1 Pet 4:3 “for the time already past is sufficient *for you* to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries”

B. What Does The Bible Say About The Character Of Christians?

1. Christians are to be holy, 2 Cor 5:17; 1 Pet 1:14-17

- Change of lifestyle

2. Christians are not to love the world, Titus 2:12; Jas 1:27; 1 John 2:15-17

- Change of desires

3. Christians are not to be a stumbling block to others, Rom 14:13; 1 Cor 8:9, 28; 2 Cor 8:21

- Change of focus

4. Christians do not live for themselves, 2 Cor 5:15; Gal 5:13-14

- Change of masters

III. What Are The Positions Advocated By Christians Today?

There are basically two positions Christians hold, (1) you can drink as long as you don't get drunk, and (2) never drink alcoholic beverages. Let's consider these—

A. Christians Today Can Drink Alcoholic Beverages As Long As They Do Not Become Intoxicated

1. Both The OT And NT Speak Positively About Drinking Wine

- These statements must be interpreted biblically and historically. *Biblically*, the Bible also condemns drunkenness. Statements such as Joel 2:24 ("the vats will overflow with the new wine") must be interpreted in their context (the Kingdom of God, where open sin will not be tolerated, including drunkenness). *Historically*, the wine of biblical times was not the same as the wine of our time. Thus, the Lord would not have played a part in the intoxication of the participants of the wedding party (John 2).

2. Jesus Made And Drank Wine And Did Not Disassociate Himself From It

- The purpose and character of the wine in Jesus' day and our day are entirely different.

3. There Is No Prohibition Against Drinking, Only Drunkenness

- a. This is a failure to apply historical interpretation to our current day. Today's alcoholic beverages are made specifically for punch and effect, i.e., to give the consumer a good feeling.
- b. A more applicable interpretation would be the moderate use of Mountain Dew or Coffee.

4. Certain Alcoholic Beverages Actually Help Your Health

- a. Given its association, potentially greater damages to your health, and the damage it can have to your spiritual life, if you're really that concerned about the possible health benefits you may miss out from the 4 oz of wine that can help your heart, you can probably get the exact same thing from Welch's grape juice, or you can ask your doctor.
- b. The point is that this is not the reason you ask to see the wine list at that nice restaurant.

5. God Made The Fruit Of The Vine And Christians Should Thank God For It (1 Tim 4:3)

- a. Then eat the grapes! God made the marijuana plant too.

B. Christians Today Should Never Drink Alcoholic Beverages

1. The Wine Of Bible Times Had A Different Character Than Today's Wine.

- a. The wine of the Bible was not unfermented grape juice, but it was significantly different than the wine of today.
- b. Different ratios of water to wine are given by ancient writers: Homer said it should be 20 parts water to 1 part wine. Pliny, 8:1; Athenaeus, 3:2.

- c. If the ratio ever went down to 1:1, it was referred to as "strong wine." Stein notes, "drinking wine unmixed, on the other hand, was looked upon as a 'Scythian' or barbarian custom" (p. 9). "Only barbarians drank it unmixed" (p. 10).
- d. 2 Maccabees 15:39 "just as it is harmful to drink wine alone, or, again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one's enjoyment"
- e. Why was wine mixed with water in biblical times? Because there were very few beverages available that were not harmful to people. There were no water purifying systems as we have them today. "The safest and easiest method of making the water safe to drink was to mix it with wine" (Stein, p. 10).
- f. "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. In other words, it is possible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts of water, but one's drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind" (Stein, p. 11).
- g. If in biblical times drinking wine unmixed was seen as a barbaric custom, how would today's practice of *increasing* the alcoholic content 3-10 times be viewed? (Stein, p. 11).

2. The Wine Of Bible Times Had A Different Purpose Than Today's Wine.

- a. Wine in Bible times was used for the purposes of water purification. This was the safest and easiest method then available for making water safe to drink.³
 - In biblical times, people, as mentioned above, were not out to increase the alcoholic content in their beverages. Rather, the beverages were used mainly because of a lack of safe drinking options. This is in contrast to today, where the goal is to increase the alcoholic content of beverages (Reimers, p. 11).
- b. The purpose of today's wine
 - 1) Why do people drink alcohol today? Because they either like the taste, like the effect that it has on them (relaxation, enjoyment), or want to be accepted by others (Reimers, p. 11). Alcoholic beverages are not consumed merely as a beverage, something to drink, as in Bible times. Rather, alcohol is consumed primarily "because it is a planned intoxicant—exactly the use prohibited in the Bible" (Reimers, p. 11).
 - 2) As today's alcoholic beverages, specifically wine, have a different purpose for today (namely, to feel good or get plastered), and one of the immediate physical effects is loss of judgment and discernment, and believers are commanded to controlled by the Spirit (Eph 5:18), no believer should have anything to do with any alcoholic beverage.
- c. There are plenty of other kinds of beverages available that are non-addictive and carry none of the potential problems of alcoholic beverages. Thus wine or other alcoholic beverages are not the best choice for the Christian's consumption.

³ "The wine of classical antiquity, however, was very different from modern wine. They always diluted it with water before consumption.... Only barbarians drank undiluted wine." Maynard A. Amerine, *Colliers Encyclopedia*, 1994, 23:518.

- d. It is not necessary for Christians to drink wine or any kind of alcoholic beverage; in NT times it was because of the lack of healthy beverages.

3. Today's Alcoholic Beverages Have Dangerous Effects And Damaging Associations

- a. It leads to death, abuse, alcoholism, drunkenness, impairs social and intellectual capacities, causes traffic fatalities, is correlated with an endless number of crimes and social ills, and taxes the economy.
- b. The possibility of the consumption of alcoholic beverages becoming a detrimental habit is high. The Christian thus dangerously opens himself up to losing control of his life.
- c. Why would a believer open himself to something with as potentially dangerous effects that the secular world recognizes are part of alcoholic beverages?

4. Consistency With Other Similar Social Problems (Smoking, Drugs, Gambling) Demands Abstinence

- a. When marijuana and other drugs came on the scene, a study was done on drug abuse, and the results were not happy for many. The number one drug problem in the US is not an "illicit" drug but an "establishment" one—alcohol. Does this mean that illicit drugs should be legalized? No, but it does provide young people to point a finger at adults who drink and accuse them of hypocrisy (Geisler, p. 54).
- b. How about moderation in the use of drugs? Gambling? Slavery?

5. Christians Are To Be Holy, Practicing Personal Separation From Worldliness

- a. Christians are to be free from bad company that can quickly corrupt behavior (1 Cor 15:33)
- b. We are to live prudent, guarded lives in this world (Eph 5:15–18).
- c. Christians must be alert for Christ's return, and the smallest amount of today's wine or alcohol affects one's senses. Alcohol does not have to be taken in large quantities to have an influence on behavior or actions, and Ephesians 5:8 has direct application here. At what point is a person drunk?
- d. Proverbs 20:1 says that wine deceives (KJV) or leads astray (NIV), and Christians should not put themselves into such a position.
- e. Wine and alcoholic beverages are associated with all that is worldly. The Christian is to be separate from worldliness (2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Phil 2:14-16; 1 Thess 5:22; 1 Pet 1:13-16; 1 John 2:15-17).

6. Christians Need To Have A Testimony That Is Above Reproach Before Other Christians And Unbelievers

- a. No Christian should partake of any tobacco product or illicit drugs. Thus, consistency demands a Christian abstain from a beverage that results in more damage than either tobacco or illicit drugs.

- 1) How can we tell young people to abstain from illicit drugs and then partake of the biggest drug in our society?
 - 2) How about moderation in gambling?
- b. One's life should be an example to others of how a follower of Christ lives.
 - c. We are to be well spoken of, Rom 14:18
 - d. A Christian's life must not be a stumbling-block to other believers who may have been saved from drink (Rom 14; 1 Cor 8:1-13). There are new believers or immature Christians who once were under, and still struggle, with this issue, and were they to receive the impression that its okay to partake of alcoholic beverages and still be a Christian, it could ruin their life.
 - e. A Christian's life must not be a stumbling-block to the unsaved or give them an occasion for reproach (1 Cor 10:28-33; 2 Cor 8:21).

IV. Conclusion

Your relationship with God demands separation from sin and worldliness, 2 Cor 6:14-7:1

Your testimony and ministry in this world must be sparkling, Phil 2:14-16

You must be blameless and above reproach, 2 Peter 3:14

Christians are not to love the world, and alcoholic beverages are intimately associated with that which is worldly, 1 John 2:15-17.

Sources:

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