

# **The Bible And Alcoholic Beverages**

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## I. Introduction

The church of Jesus Christ is greatly divided over the use of alcoholic beverages. To illustrate the great gulf that exists between churches professing to be orthodox, let me put the following five scenarios before you, and you will quickly see the kinds of practical problems with which the local church must deal.

**A.** You go out to eat at a local restaurant, and you happen to see one of the fellow members of your congregation sipping from a glass of wine. What should you think, say or do?

**B.** You are shopping at your local grocery store, and as you get into line to pay for your groceries, there you see one of the elders of your church reach into his pocket to pay for a six-pack of beer. What should you think, say or do?

**C.** Suppose you are sipping from a glass of wine at your favorite restaurant when you are approached by a fellow member who says, "I am offended to see you drink that wine." What should you think, say or do?

**D.** Visitors come to your church for several weeks, but observe that wine is used as an element in the Lord's Supper. On that issue alone, they determine they cannot become members of your church. What should you think, say or do?

**E.** A new convert is baptized and becomes a member of your church. While an unbeliever, he continuously abused drugs and alcohol. Upon becoming a Christian, he vowed to God that he would never use drugs or alcoholic beverages again. The church of which he is now a member uses wine as an element in the Lord's Supper. What should the elders think, say or do?

We'll come back to these situations after we have considered certain principles from God's Word that relate to this issue of alcoholic beverages.

## II. Ethics

**A.** Where do you learn what to think, say or do in any and every situation?

**1.** From the Scripture alone.

**a.** "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, **thoroughly furnished unto all good works**" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

**b.** "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, **and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ**" (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

c. “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, **and lean not unto thine own understanding**; in **all** thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Prov. 3:5-6).

d. “**He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool**: but whoso walketh wisely, he shall be delivered” (Prov. 28:26).

e. “**Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes**, and prudent in their own sight” (Is. 5:21).

f. “**For my thoughts are not your thoughts**, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” Is. 55:8-9).

g. “I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, **after their own thoughts**” (Is. 65:2).

h. “The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, **can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture**” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1:10).

i. How many supreme standards of judgment are there in the world? Only one--the holy Scriptures. Jesus Christ is Lord over every area of life. It's not what I believe or you believe that determines what you should think, say or do in a particular situation. It's not what you “feel” like you ought to do, nor is it even how you “feel” the Lord is leading you that is to determine your actions. It is “what saith the Scriptures” that is always to determine your convictions or actions in any matter.

**B.** What about my conscience? Isn't it a standard for me to follow in matters like the use of alcoholic beverages?

**1.** The conscience is a moral judge that either condemns or excuses your actions (Rom. 2:15).

**2.** However, since the fall of Adam, the conscience of man is not a reliable standard by which to determine truth. The conscience condemns or excuses a man's actions based upon the ethical standard it is given. If the conscience is making judgments based upon the Word of God, it is reliable. If the conscience is making judgments based upon one's feelings, one's culture, one's environment, one's church background, or on any so-called expert, than the conscience is not reliable. The conscience is not autonomous or independent. It is dependent upon some ethical standard. The only question is: Whose ethical standard? Yours or God's? The teachings of men or the Word of God? Your conscience must be submitted to the teaching of God's Word.

3. In fact, the Scripture actually teaches you to distrust your own understanding, your own thoughts, and your own ways: “Be not wise in thine own eyes” (Prov. 3:7); “He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool” (Prov. 28:26); “Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee” (Is. 47:10); “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord” (Is. 55:8). Rather than trusting in your own thoughts and your own ways, God calls you to “trust in the Lord with all thine heart” (Prov. 3:5) for in Christ “are hid **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

### III. The Different Positions On The Use Of Alcoholic Beverages

#### A. Prohibitionist

1. The Scripture absolutely prohibits alcoholic beverages to all Christians.

#### B. Abstentionist

1. Alcoholic beverages are not expressly forbidden in Scripture, yet it is wise for all Christians to refrain from using them.

#### C. Moderationist

1. The Scripture commends the use of alcoholic beverages to all Christians if used moderately.

### IV. Biblical Teaching On The Use Of Alcoholic Beverages

A. All three of the above positions firmly agree on this one point: Drunkenness is a serious sin against the express command of God (“Do not be drunk with wine” Eph. 5:18).

B. The Prohibitionist Position is contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

#### 1. Old Testament words for alcoholic beverages

##### a. *Yayin* (wine)

(1) The same wine (*yayin*) that intoxicated Noah (Gen. 9:21), Lot (Gen. 19:32-35), Nabal (1 Sam. 25:36-37), and others (Is. 28:1,7) was given as a gift to others by godly men. For example, Melchizedek, a type of Christ and the priest of the Most High God, gave *yayin* to Abraham (Gen. 14:18; Heb. 7:3).

(2) *Yayin* is commanded by God to be brought to Him as an offering in worship (Ex. 29:38,40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5,7,10).

(3) *Yayin* is a gracious blessing from God to be enjoyed by His people (Deut. 14:26; Ps. 104:14-15; Eccl. 9:7; Is. 55:1; Amos 9:13-15).

(4) *Yayin* in plenty is a sign of God’s blessing, while the lack of it is a sign of God’s cursing (Deut. 28:39).

(5) *Yayin* is one of the delicacies that Divine Wisdom prepares for all who seek her (Prov. 9:1-5).

**b. *Tirosh*** (new wine)

(1) The same *tirosh* (new wine) that could enslave the heart when abused (Hos. 4:11) is a blessing from God (Gen. 27:28,37; Deut. 7:13; Prov. 3:10).

(2) The removal of *tirosh* is a sign of God's curse (Deut. 28:51).

**c. 'asis** (sweet wine)

(1) The same 'asis (sweet wine) that intoxicates when abused (Is. 49:26; Joel 1:5) is also used as a sign of the Messianic blessings to come for God's people (Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13).

**d. *Shekar*** (strong drink, from the root *shakar*, to be drunk or intoxicated)

(1) The same *shekar* (strong drink) that makes drunk (Prov. 20:1; Is. 5:11) is yet commanded to be offered as a drink offering to the Lord in worship (Num. 28:7), and is to be joyfully consumed as a part of the "rejoicing tithe" unto the Lord (Deut. 14:26).

**e. *Hamer*** (wine in the Chaldean language, from *hamar* which means to ferment)

(1) The same *hamer* abused by Belshazzar (Dan. 5:1-4) is a blessing God gives to His people (Deut. 32:14). In Deuteronomy 32:14 *hamer* (fermented wine) parallels the phrase "the blood of the grapes" and yet it is this same *hamer* that has the capacity to intoxicate in Daniel 5:1-4.

**f. *Sobe*** (translated as wine, liquor, and drunken)

(1) This word only occurs three times in the Old Testament (Is. 1:22; Hos. 4:18; Nahum 1:10).

(2) God condemns Jerusalem because "the faithful city has become a harlot" (Is. 1:21) and because "your silver has become dross, your wine mixed with water" (Is. 1:22). The point being that all that was good in Jerusalem had become corrupted. Just as good silver is corrupted by dross, so good wine (*sobe*) is corrupted (not helped) by water. Thus, from this text it appears that the argument used by many today that the wine used in biblical times was diluted with water to such an extent as to render the alcoholic content of no effect is contradicted by Isaiah 1:22. For God says that the diluting of wine with water is a symbol of corrupting or adulterating that which is good.

**g. *Mesek*** (wine mixed with spices)

(1) The same *mesek* that produces an intoxicating drink (Is. 5:22) is used for one part of the banquet which Divine Wisdom prepares for those who seek her (Prov. 9:2,5).

(2) *Mesek* describes the mingling of spices with wine (*yayin*) as in Proverbs 9:2,5 or the mingling of spices with strong drink (*shekar*) as in Isaiah 5:22.

**h. *Mishrah*** (the juice of grapes)

(1) There is a word in the Hebrew language that means “grape juice.” The only time it is used in the Old Testament is in Numbers 6:3 where the Nazarite is not only forbidden from drinking *yayin* (wine) and *shekar* (strong drink), but is also prohibited from drinking *mishrah* (grape juice).

(2) Those who would argue from silence that there was an unfermented *yayin* (wine) used in the Old Testament must produce an example to demonstrate that such is the case. Simply to make an assertion is no argument. Otherwise, I can equally assert that such was **not** the case and my argument must stand.

(3) In interpreting the meaning of the various words used for alcoholic beverages in the Old Testament, one should assume these words refer to fermented beverages wherever they appear (since there are clear biblical references to establish the fact that they could intoxicate when abused) unless the context clearly states otherwise and cannot be understood using the standard meaning of the word found elsewhere in Scripture. In other words, God must define these words--we must not impose our own definition upon them (i.e. Scripture must interpret Scripture).

(4) Finally, since God does use a word in the Old Testament that unambiguously means grape juice (*mishrah*), why is it used only once? Why is *mishrah* (grape juice) not used instead of *yayin* (wine) throughout the Old Testament if it was essentially grape juice that was being used as a common beverage. To the contrary, God demonstrates that *yayin* (wine) and *mishrah* (grape juice) are two different types of beverages by using two different words in Numbers 6:3--one being alcoholic (*yayin*), the other being nonalcoholic (*mishrah*). Thus, wine (*yayin*) must be understood throughout the Old Testament to be a fermented beverage unless God speaking in Scripture specifically alters the meaning.

i. The only circumstances under which alcoholic beverages were prohibited in the Old Testament were the following:

(1) While priests ministered in the Tabernacle before the Lord they were to be careful that their judgment was not impaired so as not to incur the wrath of God as did Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:9).

(2) When kings sat in courts to rule as judges they were not to use anything that might dull their judgment in the use of God’s law (Prov. 31:4,5).

(3) When one took a Nazarite vow he was to refrain from what was lawfully enjoyed by others (e.g. wine, strong drink, vinegar, grape juice, grapes, or raisins) in order to demonstrate that he was consecrated to God (Num. 6:2-6). Those today who would use the Nazarite vow as a warrant to prohibit all alcoholic beverages must not stop with wine and strong drink, but must as well vow to refrain from consuming grape vinegar, grape juice, grapes or raisins (Num. 6:3). Moreover, they must not cut their hair (Num. 6:5), nor attend a funeral (Num. 6:6-7), not even the funeral of a close relative. Finally, when the days of the vow are completed (note here that this vow was not normally a lifelong separation from the things mentioned above), they must bring the following offerings to the door of the tabernacle (Num. 6:13-20): a male lamb, a female lamb, a ram, unleavened bread, drink offerings, and their hair. In other words, to resurrect the Nazarite vow is to resurrect the ceremonial shadows of the Old Testament law (Col. 2:17; Heb. 10:1). But again, note that when the vow was completed (Num. 6:20), it was not a sin to drink the same wine (*yayin*) that one was forbidden to drink while under the

Nazarite vow (Num.6:3). Thus, it is clear that the use of alcoholic beverages was not normally unlawful to God's people.

(4) The case of the Rechabites (Jer. 35:1-19) was a prophetic picture (like that of Hosea marrying a harlot) in which the Rechabite's refusal to drink wine, to build houses, to sow seed, and to plant vineyards indicated their willingness to obey the command of their father Jonadab (it was not God who prohibited these things to the Rechabites nor to any one else under normal circumstances) even though the command was strict. To the contrary, God's people, Judah, refused to obey God their Father. Furthermore, the Rechabite's vow not only involved abstaining from wine, but also other lawful activities such as building houses, sowing seed, and planting vineyards which likely indicated that a time of God's judgment was shortly to come in which the people of Judah would not drink wine, build houses, sow seed, nor plant vineyards in the land of Judah-- they would be like the Rechabites. It is obvious that just as it was not unlawful for God's people to build houses, to sow seed in a field, or to plant vineyards, so it was not unlawful for God's people to drink wine. Those today who would follow the pattern of the Rechabites in vowing to refrain from alcoholic beverages must also refuse to sow seed, plant a vineyard and live in a house, and rather vow to dwell in tents for this was the total prophetic picture that was presented to Judah (the living in a house and planting a garden would have violated their vow as much as drinking wine, cf. Jer. 35:8-10). Moreover, the Rechabites did not condemn others for drinking wine (*yayin*), living in houses, or planting gardens, thus their example does not fit into the prohibitionist position where all use of alcoholic beverages is condemned by the prohibitionist.

(5) The abuse of alcoholic beverages in drunkenness is strictly forbidden (Prov. 23:20).

## 2. New Testament words for alcoholic beverages

### a. *Oinos* (wine)

(1) *Oinos* is very obviously an alcoholic beverage for it is used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) to translate each of the Hebrew words that refer to an intoxicating drink (*yayin*, *tirosh*, *'asis*, *shekar*, *hamer*, *sobe*). Though we saw that there is a Hebrew word for the juice of grapes (*mishrah* cf. Num. 6:3) used in the Old Testament, the Septuagint does not use *oinos* (wine) to translate that word which it should have done if *oinos* (wine) in the New Testament is simply grape juice.

(2) *Oinos* in the New Testament is an intoxicating beverage for the word for a "winebibber" (i.e. one who drinks wine to an excess) is *oinopotes* (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34). In contrast to John the Baptist, the Lord was accused of being both a glutton and a winebibber (he was neither) because he ate bread and drank wine with sinners (Mt. 9:10; Mt. 11:18-19; Mk. 2:15-16; Lk. 5:29-30; Lk. 7:33-34; Lk. 15:1-2). The obvious contrast between John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus is that John, a Nazarite, lived in the wilderness and neither ate bread nor drank wine (he ate locusts and wild honey, cf. Mt. 3:4; Mk. 1:6), while Christ, a Nazarene (not a Nazarite, but a Nazarene i.e. one from Nazareth), both ate bread and drank wine. And yet the Jewish leaders found fault with both John and Christ. The Lord is simply pointing out to the Jewish leaders that their problem with John and with Him is not one of lifestyle (the lifestyles of John and Jesus were quite different), but rather their problem is with the message John and Jesus brought

(the message of John and Jesus was the same). Jesus could hardly have been accused of being a winebibber had he totally abstained from alcoholic beverages as did John.

(3) The same *oinos* that makes one drunk (Eph. 5:18) was created by Jesus to be served at a wedding feast with full knowledge that it had the capacity to make one drunk (Jn. 2:1-11). After tasting the wine which the Lord had created, the master of the feast told the bridegroom that it was the custom to give the guests “the good wine” first “and when the guests have well drunk” (literally, “when they become drunk”) then to give them the inferior wine. The Greek word for “drunk” (Jn. 2:10), *methuo* is used without exception in the New Testament to refer to one being intoxicated (Mt. 24:49; Acts 2:15; 1 Cor. 11:21; 1 Thess. 5:7; Rev. 17:2,6). The Greek word for “drunkard” (*methusos*, cf. 1 Cor. 5:11; 1 Cor. 6:10) is a form of *methuo*. One other form of *methuo* is found in the New Testament, *methuskomai* (Lk. 12:45; Eph. 5:18; 1 Thess. 5:7), and this word also refers without exception to one being intoxicated. Thus, it is clear that “the good wine” (*oinos*) which Christ created had the capacity to intoxicate. The master of the feast relates to the bridegroom that the inferior wine was normally saved to last after the guests had consumed “the good wine” and were drunk (by then they would not notice the inferior quality of the wine they were drinking), but in this case “the good wine” (the same *oinos* that could make one drunk) which Jesus had created was saved and served to the guests last. There is no getting around the fact that “the good wine” which Christ created was “the good wine” which made guests drunk at wedding feasts (Jn. 2:10). Obviously, Christ is not condoning drunkenness, but rather giving His tacit approval for the lawful use of alcoholic beverages even in social contexts.

(4) The same *oinos* that could intoxicate (Jn. 2:10; Eph. 5:18) was hailed for its medicinal value by an apostle of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 5:23). This is not a mere suggestion from Paul to Timothy, but a command (literally, “Stop using water any longer, but continuously use a little wine on account of your stomach and your frequent weaknesses.”). The inspired Word of the all wise God declares that wine in moderation is not detrimental to one’s health, but to the contrary, beneficial to one’s health (“Let God be true, but every man a liar” Rom. 3:4).

(5) The same *oinos* that had the capacity to inebriate (Jn. 2:10; Eph. 5:18) was not forbidden in moderate use to elders or deacons (1 Tim. 3:2,8) The prohibition in 1 Timothy 3:2 is against lingering a long time beside one’s wine (*paroinos*) i.e. lingering because one’s glass is repeatedly filled until drunkenness occurs. This is actually a prohibition against drinking much wine not against the moderate use of wine. This is made clear in 1 Timothy 3:8 where the prohibition is against drinking “much wine”, not against drinking wine at all.

#### **b. The fruit of the vine** (Mt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:18)

(1) This phrase does not refer to grape juice any more than does the phrase “the blood of grapes” (in Gen. 49:11 “the blood of grapes” is parallel to *yayin* i.e. alcoholic wine, and in Deut. 32:14 “the blood of grapes” is parallel to *hamer* i.e. fermented wine).

(2) If taken quite literally, “the fruit of the vine” would refer to whole grapes, thus the phrase must be used figuratively in some sense.

(3) Dunlop Moore summarizes the distinct Jewish meaning of the phrase as follows:



The expression the “fruit of the vine” is employed by our Saviour in the synoptical Gospels to denote the element contained in the cup of the Holy Supper. The fruit of the vine is literally the grape. But 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*. . . . The Christian Fathers, as well as the Jewish rabbis, have understood “the fruit of the vine” to mean wine in the proper sense. Our Lord, in instituting the Supper after the Passover, availed himself of the expression invariably employed by his countrymen in speaking of the wine of the Passover. On other occasions, when employing the language of common life, he calls wine by its ordinary name (Cited in *The Christian And Alcoholic Beverages* by Kenneth L. Gentry, p.55).

(4) Furthermore, the drink offering that was poured out before the Lord at the Passover and on other occasions was wine not grape juice (Num. 28:24; cf. Num. 28:14 where the drink offering is specifically identified as wine, *yayin* ). It would certainly follow that the Lord used wine at the Passover celebration (and at the institution of the Lord’s Supper) with His disciples in Matthew 26:29.

(5) Just as Isaiah can refer to “a vineyard of red wine” (*hamer*, fermented wine ) in Isaiah 27:2 because fermented wine is derived from the vineyard, in like manner Jesus can refer to “the fruit of the vine” and yet mean the fermented wine that is derived from the fruit of the vine.

(6) Christ teaches that the “fruit of the vine” signifies “My **blood** of the new covenant” (Mt. 26:28). Though the phrase, “the **blood** of grapes” is not used in the Last Supper account, it is difficult to overlook the parallel between the “**blood** of grapes” and the “**blood** of the new covenant.” Yet “the blood of grapes” is used synonymously for both *yayin* (alcoholic wine) in Genesis 49:11, and for *hamer* (fermented wine) in Deuteronomy 32:14.

(7) Melchizedek is a type of Christ (Heb. 7:3) while Abraham is the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:11). Even as Abraham tithed of his increase to Melchizedek, the king of righteousness (Heb. 7:2,4), so do the children of Abraham tithe of their increase to Christ, the King of righteousness (Heb. 7:9-10). Likewise, even as Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High, gave to Abraham bread and wine (*yayin* ) and then blessed Abraham (Gen. 14:18-19), so does Christ, the Great High Priest of the new covenant, give to the children of Abraham bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper and bless them (Mt. 26:26-29).

(8) Finally, one must assume that intoxicating wine was being used to celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the church of Corinth for believers were combining the love feast with the Lord’s Supper and some were partaking of the Lord’s Supper in a drunken state as a result (cf. 1 Cor. 11:21 where the verb *metheuo* is used i.e. intoxicated). Although wine was clearly abused by the Corinthian believers in conjunction with the Lord’s Supper, Paul does not condemn the Corinthian Christians for using wine, nor does he prohibit the use of wine in the Lord’s Supper. Paul’s correction is directed toward their sinful abuse of wine not their lawful use of it. If wine was not lawfully to be used in the Lord’s Supper, here was the ideal time for Paul to demonstrate where the use of wine

would lead those who broke God's law by using it in the Lord's Supper. The silence concerning any prohibition of wine in the Lord's Supper at this point is deafening.

**c. *Sikera*** (strong drink)

(1) This is one of the intoxicating beverages that John the Baptist was prohibited from drinking (Lk. 1:15). The other intoxicating drink prohibited to John was *oinos* (wine).

**d. *Gleukos*** (new wine)

(1) *Gleukos* was certainly capable of intoxication for the disciples are accused of being filled with *gleukos* (new wine) in Acts 2:13. Whereas Peter attributes the behavior of the disciples not to drunkenness (*metheuo*), but to the Spirit of God (Acts 2:15).

e. Therefore, the words used for wine in the New Testament (*oinos*, *sikera*, *gleukos*) speak of beverages that have the capacity to intoxicate contrary to the view of some who would argue that wine in the New Testament was so diluted with water that it was almost impossible to intoxicate using it, or that the wine of the New Testament was essentially grape juice.

f. There was a Greek word available to the writers of the New Testament which might have been used to refer to grape juice (*trux*) had they wanted their readers to understand that the common beverage used by Christ, the disciples, Timothy, the elders and deacons, and the Corinthian believers was unfermented grape juice (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature*, by Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, p.564). The Holy Spirit of God chose not to use *trux* (grape juice) even one time in the New Testament. There is therefore no reference in the New Testament to unfermented grape juice, but all references are to fermented wine.

**g.** A summary of New Testament principles that argue against the Prohibitionist Position.

(1) The reasoning of many Prohibitionists is as follows:

- (a) Scripture condemns drunkenness.
- (b) Drinking alcoholic beverages can lead to drunkenness.
- (c) Therefore, Scripture condemns the drinking of alcoholic beverages.

(2) However, following the same line of reasoning, Christians would also be forced to conclude the following:

- (a) Scripture condemns gluttony.
- (b) Eating food can lead to gluttony.
- (c) Therefore, Scripture condemns all eating of food.

(3) Or the following:

- (a) Scripture condemns murder.
- (b) Owning a gun can lead to murder.
- (c) Therefore, Scripture condemns the owning of all guns.

(4) Or the following:

- (a) Scripture condemns the abuse of authority.

(b) Parents have abused their authority.

(c) Therefore, Scripture condemns all parental authority.

(5) It is not the lawful use of fermented wine that is condemned in Scripture. It is the unlawful abuse of fermented wine that is condemned in Scripture.

(6) It is not what enters into the mouth that defiles a man, but rather that which proceeds from an evil heart that defiles him (Mk. 7:15-23). Therefore, wine that enters the mouth is not evil, but rather the sinful abuse of it which proceeds from an evil heart.

(7) There is no material thing that is evil in and of itself, it is the abuse of it that is evil (Rom. 14:14). Therefore, wine is not intrinsically evil, rather it is the abuse of it that is sinful.

(8) Don't submit your conscience to man-made decrees that forbid touching, tasting, or handling in order to keep the flesh in check, for they are all futile (Col. 2:20-23). The only way to keep the flesh in check is by living in dependence upon the Spirit in applying the finished work of Christ to your life (Col. 2:1-15). Therefore, God alone is Lord of the conscience (in the matter of alcoholic beverages and in any other matter) and He has left your conscience free from the commandments of men that are in any way contrary to His word.

(9) Don't give heed to doctrines of demons which teach that it is unlawful to marry or to eat certain foods which God has created, for every thing God has created is good and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer (1 Tim. 4:1-5). Therefore, since alcoholic beverages have been given by God to man (Ps. 104:14-15), they may be lawfully enjoyed by God's people if they are used with moderation and received with thanksgiving. Thus, to teach that it is sinful to use alcoholic beverages is to teach what Paul classifies as "doctrines of demons," for it is to teach that evil resides in what God has created, rather than in the evil hearts of men.

(10) The only prohibitions in the New Testament against the use of alcoholic beverages were for those who had taken Nazarite vows (as in the case of John the Baptist in Lk. 1:15; Lk. 7:33), and for those who abused them by becoming intoxicated (Eph. 5:18).

3. Therefore, I submit to you that the Scripture does not provide warrant for the Prohibitionist Position, but on the contrary does provide warrant for the moderate use of alcoholic beverages.

**C. The Abstentionist Position** is also contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

1. The position summarized: Alcoholic beverages are not expressly forbidden in Scripture, yet it is **wise** that all Christians abstain from using them.

2. It is wise for reasons of **expediency**.

a. It is a **poor witness** to unbelievers, to weaker brethren, and to our children. As a matter of love (not legalistic requirement), all Christians should totally abstain (Mt. 7:12; Rom. 14:15-21; Rom. 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 8:13; 1 Cor. 10:31-33; 1 Tim. 3:7).

(1) A response to the argument that it is a **poor witness**.

(a) It is true that we should always seek to be a good witness before believers and unbelievers alike.

(b) But even that which constitutes a Christian witness must be judged by Scripture and not by our culture. If unbelievers judge that it is a poor witness for Christians to be so “intolerant” in their views of sexual promiscuity, should they change so as to have a better witness? Or if Christians are accused of being “narrow-minded” because of their pro-life views, should they be more concerned about what God says or what man says? If Scripture does not condemn a practice as a poor witness (but on the contrary approves of the practice), then neither should you disapprove of it. Does a Christian necessarily project a biblical Christian witness to the world by practicing total abstinence when there is no biblical warrant for doing so? No!

(c) The Lord and His disciples continued to use alcoholic beverages despite the fact that sinful men abused them to their own destruction at the time in which Jesus lived just as they do today (1 Cor. 5:11; 1 Cor. 6:10). In fact, Jesus Himself was falsely accused of abusing wine (Lk. 7:31-35) and yet He didn’t discontinue His practice of drinking wine (what the Lord drank was wine for what John the Baptist did not drink was wine, cf. Lk. 7:33). He even created wine for consumption in a social context (Jn. 2:1-12). Certainly no Christian would think of accusing the infinitely wise Son of God of being unwise in that situation. However, if one believes Jesus should have abstained from all wine because He was falsely accused of being a winebibber, then likewise He should have abstained from all bread because He was also falsely accused of being a glutton.

(d) Who is the “weak” brother referred to by Paul (Rom. 14:15-21; Rom. 15:1b)? He is weak in his conscience i.e. his conscience condemns him for eating certain foods and drinking wine (perhaps because the food and wine had previously been dedicated to idols) although both the food and wine found Christ’s approval (Rom. 14:14). The problem with this “weak” brother was that his conscience was controlled by standards other than the Word of God (whether by his culture, by his own feelings, or by the commandments of men). He had allowed something other than God and His Word to be the lord of his conscience (which indicates that he was an immature Christian). As a result of this weakness, he was condemning the “strong” brother who could partake of the food and wine without offending his conscience; and thus the “weak” brother was thereby seeking to impose his “weakness” upon the church (Rom. 14:3b-4).

(e) Who is the “strong” brother referred to by Paul (Rom. 14:2a; Rom. 15:1a)? He is strong in his conscience i.e. his conscience approves of him eating all foods and drinking the wine in question (Rom. 14:2a). The conscience of the “strong” brother is not controlled by anything except by God and His Word; and since Christ approves of the food and wine (Rom. 14:14), the “strong” brother is able to enjoy them to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). This indicates that the “strong” brother is a mature Christian (Paul includes himself in the category of the “strong”, rather than in the category of the “weak” cf. Rom. 14:14; Rom. 15:1a). As a result of his lawful liberty in this area, the “strong” brother was likely to flaunt his liberty before the “weak” brother, to despise and look down at him, and not to fully receive him into the fellowship of the church because of his weakness (Rom. 14:1a,3a).

(f) What were both the “weak” and the “strong” to do in regard to these issues?

/1/ One the one hand, each one was to be convinced in his own mind (i.e. not to act contrary to what you believe you are required to do at the time, Rom.

14:5b,22-23). On the other hand, the “weak” were not to stubbornly remain in a weak position. They were to diligently study the issue involved from the vantage point of God’s Word and when persuaded that God approved of the practice in question, they were to submit their conscience to God’s authoritative Word and change their conviction regardless of how they might still “feel” about the issue.

/2/ The “weak” brother must immediately stop condemning the “strong” brother and must discontinue his attempts to impose his “weakness” upon the church (Rom. 14:3b-4). The “weak” were to outgrow their “weakness” and become mature Christians by submitting their conscience to the Word of God alone . However, it may actually be the case that a “weak” brother does outgrow his “weakness” in believing a certain practice to be sinful (e.g. drinking alcoholic beverages) and in expecting others to refrain from the practice. In such a case he becomes a “strong” believer, but for other reasons (e.g. he doesn’t care for the taste of alcoholic beverages, or he has an allergic reaction to them) he may legitimately refrain from using them in a social or private setting (in other words, the “strong” brother is not required to use alcoholic beverages privately or socially). It would hardly be an act of love for elders to leave a brother (for whom Christ died) in his weakness. To truly fulfil Matthew 7:12 (i.e. to love others as oneself) requires an elder to patiently work with a “weak” brother to overcome his “weakness.” Although the apostle Paul temporarily acted as one who was “weak” in the presence of a “weak” brother , he only did so in order to win the “weak” to the position of the “strong” (1 Cor. 9:22). This practice of “weakness” was not intended to be permanent, but rather temporary. Paul would never have permitted the position of the “weak” to become the position endorsed by the church. Paul argued from the position of the “strong” in order to bring the “weak” out of his position of “weakness.”

/3/ On the other hand, the “strong” brother must immediately cease from tempting the “weak” to sin by encouraging him to violate his conscience in partaking of food and wine which he yet believes to be sin. To consciously flaunt one’s liberty before a “weak” brother is to set a stumblingblock before him. It is to play the role of Satan in tempting him to sin (Rom. 14:13,20). The strong brother must be willing to sacrifice the lawful use of his Christian liberty temporarily in the presence of the “weak” brother, so as to keep him from stumbling (Rom. 14:21). In fact in 1 Corinthians 8:13, Paul hyperbolically illustrates this point by declaring that if eating food offered to idols leads a “weak” brother to stumble (i.e. leads a “weak” brother to eat while he yet believes it to be sinful), Paul will forever refrain from eating meat in the presence of the “weak” brother (however, for Paul to eat the meat privately at home would not violate this statement because the weak brother would have no knowledge of Paul’s eating the meat in the privacy of his own home). Those who are “strong” must remember that there are issues more important than food or drink, namely, love for the brethren and the growth of God’s kingdom (Rom. 14:16-18).

/4/ Both the “weak” and the “strong” must above all else seek the profit of the other, seek to edify one another, and seek to demonstrate the love of Christ to one another (Rom. 15:1-3).

(g) The argument that we must permanently refrain from all alcoholic beverages in order to be a good witness is unbiblical. It is not the lawful use of wine that is a bad testimony, but the unlawful use of it. Children will not be any more likely to abuse wine when it is lawfully used within a Christian family, than they would be to abuse a car when it is lawfully used within a Christian family. You should not refrain from the

lawful use of any of God's good gifts simply because there is the possibility of abuse, rather you should carefully instruct your children in the legitimate use.

(h) Finally, the argument that we must permanently abstain from all alcoholic beverages in order to maintain a good testimony before men, will open the door to hundreds of legalistic standards imposed upon the Christian simply because of the possibility that someone might be offended. In the name of not offending people, you would have to give up pork, red meat, guns, beards, jewelry, etc. ad infinitum. This is a principle that cannot be carried out consistently, nor should it be, because it is unbiblical.

**b.** The **abstentionist** also argues, "For the sake of the **"constitutional alcoholics"** around us, all Christians should abstain from the use of alcoholic beverages. There are so many "recovering alcoholics" in the work place, in the church, in the neighborhood, and in the family. Even seeing you drink one beer could lead them back into their syndrome.

(1) A reponse to the **"constitutional alcoholic"** argument.

(a) It is true that certain people have different levels of tolerance to alcoholic beverages (just as it is true that there are differing degrees of tolerance for food among people).

(b) But the notion that a predisposition toward a particular kind of sinful abuse (whether beer, sex, food, violence, fashion or any thing else) should lead all Christians to abstain permanently from the lawful use of that object (whether to abstain from all alcoholic beverages, from all sexual relationships with one's wife, from all food, from all corporal discipline, or from all clothing) is not biblical. Again, you should never wittingly tempt one whom you know to be vulnerable in a particular area, but that is quite different from advocating the permanent cessation of a good gift from God in all circumstances.

(c) The Bible teaches that all men are predisposed to sin by nature and that all men are "constitutional sinners" (Ps. 51:5; Ps. 58:3; Rom. 5:19) and yet all men are responsible for their own sin. The fact that one habitually and sinfully abuses beer and is predisposed to abuse it, should not put him into some preferential class of treatment, for all men, women, and children are in the same condition (some of our sins are just more observable than others). The point that must be made if you are to truly help one who abuses alcoholic beverages is that his problem (like abuse in any other area) is a violation of God's holy Law. It is sin against the Most High God (in biblical terms he is a drunkard cf. 1 Cor. 5:11; 1 Cor. 6:10). His problem is not that he has developed an incurable disease (called alcoholism). His problem is that he has been convinced that he can never be completely cured ("once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic"). Thus, he is told, "Take even one sip of wine in the Lord's Supper and it might set the disease off again." The answer for the one who has abused alcoholic beverages is the same answer for all sinners: All sinful habits and sinful abuses are curable by the redemptive grace of God (once an alcoholic is **not** always an alcoholic for "where sin did abound, grace did much more abound" Rom. 5:20). The Bible proclaims in Romans 8:12 that all who have died with Christ are no longer debtors to the flesh (i.e. by God's grace Christians who have turned from the abuse of alcoholic beverages do not have to answer the door, when the temptation to become drunk comes knocking at the door). Furthermore, the one who was once a drunkard is no longer viewed as a drunkard after he has been washed, sanctified,

and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Are the rest of the sinful abuses mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 incurable diseases? God forbid! The gospel is the **power of God** unto salvation to all who believe (Rom. 1:16). Thus, one is not necessarily helping the “alcoholic” by abstaining from all drinking any more than one would be helping the glutton by abstaining from all eating.

(d) If it is true that all Christians should abstain from all alcoholic beverages for the sake of the “constitutional alcoholic”, then Jesus was not wise in using wine in the presence of many “constitutional alcoholics” or potential “constitutional alcoholics” (Lk. 7:33-35) and even creating it to be used in a wedding feast where the possibility for drunkenness was certainly present (Jn 2:1-12).

(e) Researcher, John Langone, has noted:

Heredity, errors in the body’s chemistry that prevent the alcoholic from using alcohol properly, brain defects, allergy, vitamin deficiency, glandular problems, a defective “thermostat” that causes an uncontrollable thirst for alcohol all have been examined by researchers. But thus far, none has been shown to be specifically responsible for alcoholism. There is no physical examination or blood test that can yet be performed to determine why a person has become an alcoholic, or whether he or she will become one; and no one has isolated a specific gene, that unit of heredity, for alcoholism (cited in *The Christian And Alcoholic Beverages* by Kenneth L. Gentry, p.100).

(f) Morris Chafetz, M.D., a reputable authority on the subject of alcoholism and member of the National Institute on Alcohol and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA) has remarked, “Some say that only a hairline separates the social or moderate drinker from the alcoholic. Don’t you believe it—a grand canyon separates them (cited in *The Christian And Alcoholic Beverages* by Kenneth L. Gentry, p.101)

(g) The abuse of alcoholic beverages is not a problem with genetics, it is a problem with sin. The answer is Christ.

c. Again the **abstentionist** argues, “All Christians should abstain from the alcoholic beverage because it is **a drug that is harmful to one’s health.**”

(1) A response to the argument that **alcoholic beverages are harmful to one’s health.**

(a) The Scripture does not teach that wine is unhealthy. To the contrary it teaches that the lawful use of wine is good for one’s health (1 Tim. 5:23). God would not have commended the lawful use of wine throughout Scripture, if it was destructive to one’s health (“Let God be true, but every man a liar” Rom. 3:4) .

(b) Divine Wisdom invites the foolish to drink of her wine (Prov. 9:5).

(c) It is possible to be allergic to alcoholic beverages (just as some people are allergic to milk, eggs, sugar, etc). In such cases, one should abstain from the social and private use of alcoholic beverages, but it is no more necessary to encourage all Christians (even those who are not allergic) to refrain from their use than there is to encourage all Christians to abstain from the use of milk, eggs, or sugar simply because some may be allergic to these products.

(d) Dr. Morris E. Chafetz, a physician that works with the NIAAA corrects this mistaken notion by indicating:

Between effects of heavy or excessive alcohol intake and moderate drinking there is a great distinction. Excessive consumption increases mortality and produces various types of damage . . . . However, there is no evidence of damaging effects even from the steady intake of moderate amounts and, indeed, mortality statistics reviewed elsewhere in this *Report* suggest a possible beneficial effect. . . . In view of the statistical indications that moderate drinkers live longer than abstainers, it seems possible that the beneficial effect of moderate drinking may apply especially to old age (Cited in *The Christian And Alcoholic Beverages* by Kenneth L. Gentry, p.104).

(e) Raymond McCarthy, editor of *Drinking and Intoxication*, has confirmed the statements of Paul in 1 Timothy 5:23:

In moderate amounts alcohol stimulates the flow of gastric juices and promotes motility. . . . There is no evidence that alcohol ever causes gastric ulcers, doctors forbid their ulcer patients to drink because of the increased gastric flow. Moderate amounts of alcohol do not interfere with digestion; they may even promote it (Cited in *The Christian And Alcoholic Beverages* by Kenneth L. Gentry, p.105).

d. Furthermore, the **abstentionist** declares, “All Christians should abstain from the use of alcoholic beverages because they are so **abused within our culture.**”

(1) A response to **the cultural argument** for abstaining from alcoholic beverages.

(a) That is not all that is abused by this culture.

(b) What about sex, money, food, clothing, academics, authority, etc.

(c) The unlawful abuse of a thing does not argue against the lawful use of it, otherwise all Christians would be compelled to abstain from the lawful use of sex, money, food, clothing, academics, and authority (all these items are certainly abused today).

(d) Christ commissioned the church to disciple all nations (in all cultures) baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you** (Mt. 28:19-20). The answer is not to abstain from that which God declares to be lawful, but rather the answer is to **teach** the proper use of that which is lawful.

3. Therefore, I submit to you that **the Abstinance Positon** finds no warrant in Scripture, but to the contrary, the Scripture teaches the moderate use of alcoholic beverages.

## V. The Five Scenarios Revisited

A. What should you think, say or do if you were to see a member of your congregation sipping wine at a local restaurant? You should greet him as a brother in



Christ and understand that he is violating no command of God, but rather is enjoying the liberty which Christ has purchased for him.

**B.** What should you think, say or do if you happen to see an elder in your church buying a six-pack of beer? You should greet him respectfully as an ordained officer within the church of Jesus Christ and understand that he has broken no statute of God, but rather is enjoying the liberty of conscience which Christ has purchased for him. Furthermore, he is taking the beer home to enjoy in the privacy of his home, rather than flaunting his liberty in public.

**C.** If you are the church member who is approached in the restaurant while sipping wine, and you are told that your actions have offended a brother, it is your responsibility to seek to remove the offense in a gracious, non-defensive manner. First, let the brother know that you appreciate his coming to you immediately, rather than allowing the incident to boil within him or using the incident as a juicy piece of gossip. Second, seek to present the biblical position of moderation, demonstrating that neither the prohibitionist position nor the abstentionist position can be defended biblically. Third, let him know that you would never wittingly offend a brother and that you don't believe a sin was committed on your part. Fourth, if you are unsuccessful in removing the offense after several attempts, bring an elder to help resolve the issue.

**D.** Wine should be used in the Lord's Supper because it was the element Christ used in instituting the sacrament (cf. the discussion under the New Testament use of wine). We have no more authority to substitute grape juice for the wine than to substitute potato chips for the bread, or to substitute clear baby oil for water in baptism. Elders should be careful not to suddenly spring issues like this on potential members. Knowing in advance that many churches today use grape juice in the Lord's Supper rather than wine, elders should raise the topic with prospective members for their consideration and instruction as soon as possible. Most obstacles to using wine in the Lord's Supper can be overcome with potential members by giving the biblical warrant in a patient and gracious spirit. Do not set the precedent of giving grape juice to some and wine to others. Not only is it unbiblical, but it also gives members the idea that the worship of God is a matter of preference rather than a matter of God's command.

**E.** The new convert (that has recently become a member of the church) should be advised that to make a vow that would prohibit him from coming to the Lord's Supper is an unlawful vow (e.g. the church uses wine and he vowed never to use wine). He should be gently instructed to repent of having made a rash vow (although it was a sincere vow). God does not require him to keep a vow that would bring him into direct disobedience to another command of God. Vows to God can only bind one to fulfill what the Lord declares to be His revealed will. Since the use of wine is not sinful and since it is God's revealed will that the new convert receive the Lord's Supper (with wine), he must at least make allowance for using wine in the Lord's Supper by rescinding his vow through repentance and forgiveness even if he chooses to abstain from alcoholic beverages in every other situation. God does not require the use of alcoholic beverages in social or private settings, but He does require it in the Lord's Supper.

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