

The Christian and the use of Alcoholic Beverages #1

Introduction: Our recent discussion of the qualification of elders has opened up again a discussion of the Christian's use of alcoholic beverages. I'm aware that there have been occasional discussions of the question among us. Please allow me to "weigh in" on this subject, though I will probably disappoint about everybody in the room. The reason is that Christians have polarized to extreme positions on this subject:

- 1. There are those who believe that if you let one drop of alcohol touch your lips, other than medication, you have sinned against God.**
 - 2. There are others who believe that one may freely drink modern alcoholic beverages without concern as long as one does not get drunk.**
- I cannot fully agree with either of these views.**

The older I've gotten the more I've appreciated the liberty I have in Christ and the more reluctant I've become to bind opinions not explicitly taught in Scripture. In addition, I've become more aware of the tendency that well-intentioned religious people have to help God out by insisting that people not do what God Himself did not forbid, even if that means at time creating some arbitrary constructions and ignoring a few Scriptures that don't quite fit our conclusions.

On the other hand, I've seen first hand the devastation and destruction that the misuse of alcohol has brought to individuals and families. I've spent countless hours trying to keep a former alcoholic "on the wagon". All of us know the devastation that alcohol has caused in our society (broken homes, untimely deaths on the highway).

So on the one hand, I don't want to be a legalist who binds where God hasn't bound (even when I think my judgments are preferable) and I don't want to be a libertarian who turns God's grace into a rationale for what will inevitably lead to sinful and destructive behavior.

What does the Bible say about the use of wine or strong drink? Let's begin with a historical and cultural background in which to view the Biblical texts.

The cultural and historical background for the OT and NT texts

Viticulture has been a part of the Biblical setting from ancient times.

Then Noah began farming and planted a vineyard. And he drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent.

(Genesis 9:20-21)

The climate of the Mediterranean world made the growing of grapes an attractive practice producing large amounts of produce. Thus, vineyards were an important feature of the landscape and even a metaphor for

God's people. Isaiah's picture of Israel gives us a good picture of an ancient vineyard:

Let me sing now for my well-beloved a song of my beloved concerning His vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill. And He dug it all around, removed its stones, and planted it with the choicest vine. And He built a tower in the middle of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. Then He expected it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones. (Isaiah 5:1-2)

The abundance of the grape harvest was considered a great blessing from the Lord. This harvest of grapes and its juice was considered a gift of God and is often associated with the harvest of grain and olives.

And the Lord will answer and say to His people, "Behold, I am going to send you grain, new wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied in full with them; and I will never again make you a reproach among the nations. (Joel 2:19)

The Hebrews called this grape harvest "tirosh" (usually translated into our text "new wine"). There are numerous OT references to this "new wine" which was not initially alcoholic; but due to the environmental conditions would quickly begin to ferment.

The grapes were gathered and placed in large vats or presses like the one mentioned in the Isaiah text. The grapes would be tread and the juice would be expressed and usually run to a lower vat. This action is sometimes used metaphorically for an act of God's judgment or wrath.

Who is this who comes from Edom, with garments of glowing colors from Bozrah, This One who is majestic in His apparel, marching in the greatness of His strength? "It is I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save." Why is Your apparel red, and Your garments like the one who treads in the wine press? "I have trodden the wine trough alone, and from the peoples there was no man with Me. I also trod them in My anger, and trampled them in My wrath; and their lifeblood is sprinkled on My garments, and I stained all My raiment. "For the day of vengeance was in My heart, and My year of redemption has come. "And I looked, and there was no one to help, and I was astonished and there was no one to uphold; so My own arm brought salvation to Me; and My wrath upheld Me. "And I trod down the peoples in My anger, and made them drunk in My wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth." (Isaiah 63:1-6)

A significant and important part of the discussion of Biblical wines has to do with what ancient people did with the grape harvest. Did they try to preserve fresh grape juice or did they allow the grape juice to turn to ferment into wine?

There is no doubt that it was possible for ancient people to preserve grape juice. The best way to stop fermentation would be to boil the pressed liquid down to a syrup and then preserve it in a very cool place or a sealed jar much like we would do in "canning". However this process was very time consuming, expensive, and unnecessary in view

of the common use of wine. It is possible that some of the grapes or juice were preserved in this way; but the evidence of Scripture and history seems to favor the idea that the ancient people allowed the grape juice to ferment and produce wine.

To insist on a distinction between intoxicating and unfermented wine is a case of unjustifiable special pleading. (ISBE)

If the juice were allowed to sit undisturbed it would begin fermentation almost immediately as the yeasts on the grape skin reacted with the sugar in the grapes, producing alcohol and carbon dioxide. This primary fermentation process would continue for several days. During this time the yeast would metabolize the sugar producing an alcoholic liquid. The Hebrews called this product “yayin” or “wine”. The word occurs 141 times in the OT.

The wine would be transferred to storage jars where the lees or dregs would settle to the bottom of the jar. The new wine was stored in a cool place to finish fermentation (secondary fermentation) and age to enhance its flavor. It might be poured from one jar to another after settling to refine it.

And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, and refined, aged wine. (Isaiah 25:6)

“Moab has been at ease since his youth; He has also been undisturbed on his lees, neither has he been emptied from vessel to vessel, nor has he gone into exile. Therefore he retains his flavor, and his aroma has not changed. (Jeremiah 48:11)

“And it will come about at that time that I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit, who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good or evil!’ (Zephaniah 1:12)

Wine stored in jars could also be put into bottles (skins) for personal use. Since there was some residual fermentation even after the primary fermentation was complete, it was necessary to use a new skin that would stretch with the production of gases in the container.

“Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.” (Matthew 9:17)

So this is the process in view in the various wine texts. The finished wine might have an alcoholic content of about 6-12% alcohol, depending upon the type of grape, sugar content and way of preparation. We should remember that the distillation process was invented in the Middle Ages and it was impossible for ancient people to make the highly alcoholic beverages that are often produced and consumed today.

Conclusion: This then is the backdrop for the Biblical texts that speak about wine and its use. I urge you not to take this information and make a logical leap to the idea that it is acceptable for Christian's today to freely drink alcoholic beverages. There is much more to be said about the cultural background and about the Biblical view of the use of alcohol and the modern application. So let me urge you to reserve judgment until we have considered all the evidence.