

The Christian and the Use of Alcohol #3

Intro: Now that we have looked into the historical and cultural background of wine production and use in the ancient world, we have a better ability to evaluate the Biblical texts on wine use. Already we have looked at a number of texts that describe the production and preservation of the grape harvest and that describe the common custom of mixing wine with water.

When we understand the cultural background it helps us make sense of the Biblical teaching.

On the one hand, the drinking of wine is acknowledged to be a way of enjoying the blessings of God.

God anticipated that Israel would drink wine and strong drink while living in the land of Canaan.

“You have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or strong drink, in order that you might know that I am the Lord your God.

(Deuteronomy 29:6)

Through the period of the wilderness wanderings, the Israelites had been totally dependent upon the Lord to supply every need; and God had used this as a time to humble them and make them aware of His goodness and the need to remain faithful to Him. But now conditions would change. They would partake of the abundance of the land of Canaan. They would eat bread and drink wine and strong drink.

However, these things must not cause them to turn away from the Lord. Hopefully they had learned in the wilderness to always trust in His provisions; thus, their hearts should not be corrupted by the luxuries of the new way of life they were about to enter. The implication is very clear that in the land of Canaan they would “eat bread and drink wine and strong drink.

However He warns the consequences of turning away from the Lord and the punishment it will bring for them:

“You shall plant and cultivate vineyards, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall devour them.

(Deuteronomy 28:39)

Later Amos confirms the fulfillment of this warning from the Lord when the Israelites became unfaithful to Him.

Therefore, because you impose heavy rent on the poor and exact a tribute of grain from them, though you have built houses of well-hewn stone, yet you will not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, yet you will not drink their wine. (Amos 5:11)

But when they repented, he promises a restoration of the previous enjoyed blessings.

“Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, they will also plant vineyards

and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit. (Amos 9:14)

God gives permission to use wine and strong drink in the feasts they had in His presence.

“And you may spend the money for whatever your heart desires, for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household. (Deuteronomy 14:26)

In this text, God gives instructions to those who lived far away from the tabernacle and tells them how to prepare for a feast at the tabernacle. Since they could not bring with them all they would use in their feasts before the Lord, God gave them permission to bring money with them with which they could buy everything they wanted for a feast in the Lord’s presence. Among the things they would buy were “wine” and “strong drink”.

The wisdom literature contains a number of approving references to the use of wine.

Solomon encourages all to live life to the fullest knowing the vanity of our existence, that death awaits each of us. Thus:

Go then, eat your bread in happiness, and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. (Ecclesiastes 9:7)

The psalmist expresses thanks to God who provides for man’s needs, including:

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. (Psalm 104:15)

On the other hand, the drinking of wine is discouraged or forbidden as an intoxicant that interferes with proper behavior.

Solomon warned of the dangers of wine consumption and its effects on behavior when intoxicated.

Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise. (Proverbs 20:1)

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long over wine, those who go to taste mixed wine. (Proverbs 23:29-30)

The dangers of drinking wine are particularly acute to those who must serve in responsible positions. Hence wine was forbidden to:

Those who were dedicated to God in a Nazarite vow.

he shall abstain from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh or dried grapes. (Numbers 6:3)

Those who were serving God in the tabernacle (Lev. 10).

“Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you may not

die—it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations— (Leviticus 10:9)

Rulers are warned of the dangers of drinking while they exercise their rule.

It is not for kings, O Lemuel, It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink, lest they drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. (Proverbs 31:4-5)

How is this tension to be resolved?

A common approach among preachers is to make all passages that seem to view “wine” in an approving way to refer to grape juice only. All passages that seem to view “wine” in a discouraging way to refer to “fermented grape juice”.

Jeffcoat, observing these two usages concluded, “The natural inference is that two different substances are designated by these totally different characterizations”. And this the typical approach for those who advocate total abstinence from alcohol in any measure.

However, this approach is problematic.

The same Hebrew word is found in all these texts. The commonly used Hebrew word for “wine” (yayin) almost certainly refers to an alcoholic beverage. Making an arbitrary distinction rests upon “special pleading”, the assumption of the thing to be proved.

It ignores the archeological and historical evidence that wine was commonly preserved in this form for future usage and assumes that ancient people wanted to preserve all grape juice as juice and not as wine.

A more reasonable approach is to recognize that the Scriptures see wine and strong drink having both a proper and an improper usage and that the one is encouraged, the other is discouraged in the strongest terms. What are the distinguishing factors?

How the wine is prepared

In last week’s study we showed numerous references from the ancient world showing that wine was commonly mixed with water. Among the Jews the commonly mentioned ratio is 3 parts water to one part wine. When wine was drunk in this way it could be seen as a blessing of God. It would provide a healthy alternative to unpurified water. It would have a pleasant taste. Its low alcoholic content would not intoxicate unless drunk in large quantities.

In contrast, if one drunk wine “unmixed” he was asking for trouble. The ancient Greeks considered it a Scythian custom.

The quantity consumed

It is interesting that one of the strongest OT warnings against wine drinking is prefaced with an exhortation against overindulgence of both food and drink!

Listen, my son, and be wise, and direct your heart in the way. Do not be with heavy drinkers of wine, or with gluttonous eaters of meat; For the heavy drinker and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags.

(Proverbs 23:19-21)

In the NT the word “much” is used to describe an improper use of wine:

Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, (1 Timothy 3:8)

Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips, nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, (Titus 2:3)

In the NT the word “little” is used in contrast to describe a proper use.

No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. (1 Timothy 5:23)

A common interpretation is to treat this text as if it gives permission to drink wine medicinally but not in any other way. I believe that misses the point, especially in light of the rest of the Biblical evidence. Timothy, for whatever reason, had chosen to drink only water. That practice was not normative for Christians and it had caused him physical difficulties. Paul is not urging Timothy to drink wine as a medicine; and all others to never drink wine at all. He is urging him to forgo an ascetic and unhealthy practice and adopt instead the normative and healthy practice of people in the ancient world, to use a “little wine”, that is a small amount of wine mixed with water as a beverage. By doing so, he would prevent the stomach problems associated with drinking unpurified water!

The effect on the drinker

When wine leads to joy and praise of God it is proper.

“And you may spend the money for whatever your heart desires, for oxen, or sheep, or wine, or strong drink, or whatever your heart desires; and there you shall eat in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household. (Deuteronomy 14:26)

When wine leads to drunkenness it is improper.

One of the NT words for “drunkenness” is οἰνοφλυγία.

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, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. (1 Peter 4:3)

Lexicographers define it as “drunkenness, implying the consumption of a large quantity of wine - drunkenness.” (Lowe and Nida)

not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. (1 Timothy 3:3)

mequso", ou m; **oijnopoth**", ou m; **paroino**", ou m:
a person who habitually drinks too much and thus becomes a drunkard - ‘drunkard, heavy drinker.’

Conclusion: So the Biblical evidence leads to the conclusion that ancient people were permitted to drink wine in small quantities as a mixed beverage in a meal or feast, but were strongly discouraged from drinking large quantities of mixed wine for the purpose of intoxication. There was a drastic difference in those two things.

But the question remains, “How shall we take the Biblical statements and apply them in our culture?”