

WINE IN THE BIBLE¹

Drinking is a major problem around the world and the cause of many alcohol related problems like retarded children, divorce, violence in the home, crime, sickness and death.

Is the church guilty to some degree for supporting a moderationist view instead of total abstinence?

The moderationist position rests on the belief that Scripture condemns the *immoderate use* of alcohol but approves its *moderate use*. This belief is in turn based on the assumption that the Bible knows only of fermented wine ('one wine theory') which it considers as a divine blessing to be enjoyed with moderation. According to this theory, any condemnation of wine in the Bible refers not to the *kind* of wine, but to the *amount* consumed.



Moral or Medical Issue?

By maintaining that the Bible sanctions the moderate use of alcoholic beverages, moderationists have led people to believe that drinking alcohol is not a *moral* but a *medical* issue. It is not a transgression of a God-given principle, but a habit which can harm one's health, if abused. The elimination of any sinful connotation from the use of alcohol has had an enormous influence on the drinking habits of millions of Christians. It has provided Christians with an alleged biblical and moral justification for drinking alcohol, thus depriving them of a biblical and moral conviction for abstaining from intoxicating beverages.

The Meaning of "Wine"

The word for 'wine' in the Bible refers to both fermented wine or unfermented grape juice. This significant finding discredits the claim that the Bible knows only fermented wine, which it approves when used moderately. The truth of the matter is that the Bible knows both fermented wine, which it disapproves, and unfermented grape juice, which it approves.

"Wine" in Biblical Perspective

Positive references to "wine" have to do with unfermented and unintoxicating grape juice. Because of its natural and nourishing properties, grape juice was fittingly used to represent the divine blessing of material prosperity (Gen. 27:28; 49:10-11; Deut. 33:28), the blessing of the messianic age (Joel 2:18-19; Jer. 31:10-12; Amos 9:13-14), the free offer of God's saving grace (Isa. 55:1), the wholesome joy God offers to His people (Ps 104:14-15; 4:7), and the acknowledgment of God through the use of grape juice as tithe, offerings and libations (Num. 18:12; Deut. 14:23; Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13).

On the other hand, the negative references to 'wine' have to do with fermented and intoxicating

wine. Some of the reasons Scripture condemns the use of alcoholic beverages are that they distort the perception of reality (Isa. 28:7; Prov. 23:33); they impair the capacity to make responsible decisions (Lev. 10:9-11); they weaken moral sensitivities and inhibitions (Gen. 9:21; 19:32; Hab. 2:15; Isa. 5:11-12); they cause physical sickness (Prov. 23:20-21; Hos. 7:5; Isa. 19:14); and they disqualify for both civil and religious service (Prov. 31:4-5; Lev. 10:9-11; Eze. 44:23; 1 Tim. 3:2-3; Titus 1:7-8).

Jesus and Wine

The 'good wine' Jesus *made* at Cana (John 2:10) was 'good' not because of its high alcoholic content, but because it was fresh, unfermented grape juice. This is indicated by external and internal considerations. Externally, contemporary authors, such as Pliny and Plutarch, attest that 'good wines' were those which did not intoxicate, having had their alcoholic potency removed.



Internally, moral consistency demands that Christ could not have miraculously produced between 500-600 litres of intoxicating wine for the use of men, women and children gathered at the Cana's wedding feast, without becoming morally responsible for prolonging and increasing their intoxication. Scriptural and moral consistency requires that 'the good wine' produced by Christ was fresh, unfermented grape juice. This is supported by the very Greek adjective used to describe it, namely *kalos*, which denotes that which is morally excellent, instead of *agathos*, which means simply good.

The 'new wine' Jesus *commended* through the parable of the new wineskins (Luke 5:37-38; Mark 2:22) was unfermented must (must is freshly pressed grape juice that contains the skins, seeds, and stems of the fruit), either boiled or filtered, because not even new wineskins could withstand the pressure of the gas produced by fermenting new wine.

The self-description of Jesus as 'eating and drinking' (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:34) does *not* imply that He *used* alcoholic wine, but rather that He freely associated with people at their meals and elsewhere. The phrase "eating and drinking" was used idiomatically to describe Christ's social lifestyle.

The 'fruit of the vine' Christ *commanded* to be used as a memorial of His redeeming blood (Matt. 26:28-29; Mark 14:24-25) was not fermented wine, which in the Scripture represents human depravity and divine indignation, but pure unfermented grape juice, which is a fitting emblem of Christ's untainted blood shed for the remission of our sins. This conclusion was established through a study of the language of the Last Supper, the Jewish Passover wine, the Passover law of fermentation, the consistency of the symbol and the survival of the use of unfermented grape juice at the Lord's Supper. Most telling is the fact that Josephus calls the freshly squeezed grape juice 'the fruit of the vine.' This establishes unequivocally that the phrase was used to designate the sweet, unfermented juice of the grape. The evidences submitted shows that Jesus abstained from all intoxicating substances and gave no sanction to His followers for using them.

Wine in the Apostolic Church

The New Testament church upholds the Bible's teaching on alcoholic beverages. The very passages often used to support the moderationist view, under close scrutiny are found to negate such a view, teaching abstinence instead. For example, the irony of the mockers' charge that on the day of Pentecost the apostles were drunk on *gleukos*, that is, on the grape juice which apparently was their common beverage (Acts 2:13), provides an indirect but important proof of their self-denying lifestyle and by inference, the lifestyle of their Master. There would have been no point in the mockers attributing to unfermented grape juice the cause of the disciples' strange actions, if it was not common knowledge that the apostles abstained from intoxicating wine. The intended jibe was that the disciples were such naïve simpletons they got drunk on grape juice!

Similarly, Paul's reference to drunkenness at the communion table of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:21) offers no support for a moderate use of alcoholic wine, for two reasons. First, whatever was done at Corinth was a departure from the instructions Paul had delivered to the church (1 Cor. 11:23); thus, the Corinthians' conduct constitutes a warning rather than an example for us. Second, a study of the meaning of the Greek word generally translated as *drunk* ('satiated') and of the implications of Paul's admonitions, clearly suggests that the problem at Corinth was indulgence in eating rather than intoxication with alcoholic wine.

The most powerful Biblical indictments against intoxicating wine is in Eph. 5:18, where Paul condemns wine as the cause of debauchery and shows the irreconcilable contrast between the spirit of wine and the Holy Spirit of God.

It is also worth noting that many English versions translate the Greek words *nepho* (verb) and *nephalios* (adjective) with their secondary, instead of primary meanings. The primary meaning of the verb is 'to abstain from wine' and of the adjective 'abstinent, without wine.' Yet, as mentioned, these words are consistently translated with their secondary sense of being 'temperate, sober, steady' [see for example 1 Tim. 3:2, 11 and Titus 2:2]. This has led many sincere Christians into believing that the Bible teaches moderation in the use of alcoholic beverages, rather than abstinence from them.

Some Misunderstood Passages

Proverbs 31:6, for example, suggests in an *ironical* fashion that alcoholic beverages are only suited for killing the excruciating pain of someone who is dying. Similarly, Hosea 4:11 provides no justification for a moderate use of alcoholic beverages for two reasons. First, because 'wine and new wine' are mentioned figuratively, as representative of the good gifts God had provided to the children of Israel, gifts which they had used for idolatrous purposes. Second, even if 'wine and new wine' were alcoholic, they are condemned in the text for taking away understanding, irrespective of the quantity used.

In a different yet equally convincing way, 1 Timothy 5:23 supports the principle of abstinence in two significant ways. First, the advice, "No longer drink *only* water," implies that Timothy could have abstained until that time from all forms of grape products. Second, the apostle recommended to Timothy to use only a *little* wine, not for the physical pleasure of the belly, but for the medical need of the stomach. Ancient writers such as Aristotle, Athanaeus, and Pliny indicate that unfermented wine was known and preferred to alcoholic wine for medical purposes,

because it did not have the side effects of the latter. In the light of these testimonies and of the other Biblical teachings regarding wine, it is reasonable to assume that the wine recommended by Paul for medical use was unfermented grape juice.

In 1 Timothy 3:8 Paul says that deacons should not be 'given to much wine.' Moderationists have used this as a proof text in favour of their stance, but moderation cannot be argued from this text based on the following reasons:

- a. It would contradict the rest of Scripture as well as Paul's requirement of abstinence for bishops. In studying 1 Timothy 3:2-8 we find that verse 2 says that a bishop [overseer] should be an 'abstainer from wine' – *nephalios* in Greek, so too deaconesses/deacon's wives (vs. 11 - *nephalios*) as well as older men and women (Titus 2:2-3 - *nephalios*). Paul would thus set up an absurd double standard if he denies wine to one group but allows another moderate use.
- b. The immediate context and the cultural setting of hospitality suggests that the phrase may represent a recommendation for deacons to be moderate in drinking grape juice to safeguard their reputation and that of the church while doing home visits. A deacon who drank several cups of juice would soon become known for his gluttony.

The conclusion of this whole study on the Biblical teaching regarding the use of alcoholic beverages can be summarized in one sentence: Scripture is consistent in teaching moderation in the use of wholesome, unfermented beverages and abstinence from the use of intoxicating fermented beverages.

¹ Abridged and adapted from the late Samuele Bacchiocchi's preview to his book (taken from the website: http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/books/wine_in_the_bible/1.html) as well as his actual book, *Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages* (Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 1989).