

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT DRINKING ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES?

By Pastor Kirk DiVietro, Th.D., Ph.D.

A few years ago a world renown Baptist evangelist shocked the world by saying that the Bible does not teach abstinence from alcoholic beverages. He was quoted and misquoted but in subsequent interviews he reaffirmed this basic statement. Since avoiding sin is one of the responsibilities of every man but especially the Christian we should know what the Scriptures teach on this matter.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE MEAN "WINE"?

The best way to know what the Bible means by a word is to look up the word and see how it is used in the Bible. Quite often the dictionary, even a Bible dictionary, does not define words the way that God does. Remember that the Bible is the best commentary on the Bible.

Wine appears 219 times in the King James Bible. In the New Testament it is the translation of the Greek word OINOS. In the Old Testament it is the translation of several words.

1. Tirosh תִּירוֹשׁ - Used 38 times in the Hebrew text TIROSH means "must, fresh, or new wine." It does not refer to fermented grape juice though fermented grapejuice comes from TIROSH.

1. 11 times - used with grain and oil as a "firstfruit" of the harvest.

2. 17 times - used with grain and oil clearly implying grape juice.

3. 3 times - it fills the wine press.

4. 1 time - it is still in the grape.

5. 1 time - it is the material from which alcoholic wine is made.

6. 1 time - it is associated with wickedness but YAYIN (see below) is used in the same verse so TIROSH is not necessarily alcoholic even here.

2. Yayin יַיִן - Used 135 times in the Hebrew text, YAYIN may or may not be alcoholic depending on the context.

1. 30 times - mentioned with drunkenness and its use is condemned or prohibited. e.g. Num. 6:3; Dan. 1:8.

2. 65 times - its use is clearly denounced.

3. Other lesser words translated "wine."

1. MIMSAK מִמְסַךְ - anything mixed

2. SOBE סֹבֵא - anything sucked up through a straw

3. ENAB אֵנָב - a ripe grape, a grape cake

4. ASIS אֶסִּיס - anything pressed out

5. SHEMARIN שְׁמָרִין - that which satisfies

6. CHAMAR חָמָר or חֲמָר - syrup of grape

4. Related word- SHEKAR שֶׁכָּר - "strong drink"

This word describes any fermented beverage made other than those made with grapes. It is used 22 times in the Hebrew text.

1. 21 times it is associated with yayin.
 2. 19 times it is condemned in some degree.
- Our knowledge of ancient methods of fermentation and distilling indicates that at its most potent state no SHEKAR would have contained more than 14% alcohol.
5. The Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Text from about the 2nd century A.D. uses the word οἶνος OINOS to translate all of the words above except SHEKAR. OINOS is the etymological parent of our word "wine". (The "oi" softened into a "w".) When the translators of the KJV did their work they used the word "wine" translate these words just as the Septuagint translators had done. Wine in the Bible, therefore, does not always mean an alcoholic form of grape juice.

Instead of listing all 219 the following verses are listed because they demonstrate the wide and varied uses of the word "wine".

Genesis 9:21 And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent.

Note that Noah got drunk drinking wine. This certainly demonstrates that "wine" as used by Scripture may be alcoholic.

Genesis 14:18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he *was* the priest of the most high God.

Here we have the Priest of God in the days of Abraham bringing wine to Abraham.

Deuteronomy 7:13 And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee.

The increase of wine is one of the blessing of God for Israel.

I Samuel 25:36 And Abigail came to Nabal; and, behold, he held a feast in his house, like the feast of a king; and Nabal's heart *was* merry within him, for he *was* very drunken: wherefore she told him nothing, less or more, until the morning light.

Nabal got drunk drinking wine.

These verses which we have quoted so far seem to support the position of the evangelist quoted above. We must not, however, base our convictions on a few verses. We must know the full mind of the Scriptures before we know the will of God in a matter. There are some verses in the Bible which clarify what God is saying.

Joel 2:24 And the floors shall be full of wheat, and the fats shall overflow with wine and oil.

The "fats" are the presses where the olives and the grapes were pressed. The fats overflow with "wine". The juice of a grape, freshly squeezed is called wine in this verse. "Wine" is not necessarily alcoholic in the Scriptures.

Proverbs 3:10 So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.

Again the wine of this verse is still in the presses. It is not fermented yet it is called "wine." The term "new wine" is used here. Some people say that "new wine" is not alcoholic while "wine" is alcoholic. The Bible use of these terms just does not back this up.

Isaiah 65:8 Thus saith the Lord, As the new wine is found in the cluster, and one saith, Destroy it not; for a blessing is in it: so will I do for my servants' sakes, that I may not destroy them all.

In this verse the wine is still **in the grape**. It could hardly be considered to be fermented and alcoholic.

We have demonstrated that wine can be either the alcoholic or nonalcoholic juice of the grape. In fact if one took the time to look up every one of the 219 times it is in the Bible he would find that it means: grape syrup, grape juice, ripe grapes, grape cakes, new wine, and wine. The honest Bible student will discover that the context of a particular use of the word "wine" determines whether it is speaking of alcoholic wine or a nonalcoholic variety.

WHERE DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABSTINENCE?

The Bible does teach abstinence from intoxicating, alcoholic wine. The following verses demonstrate this.

Leviticus 10:9 Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: *it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations:*

Leviticus 10:10 And that ye may put difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean;

The priests of Israel were forbidden to drink wine when they ministered in the tabernacle and the temple. God gave the reason. There was to be a separation between the holy and the unholy. Either God was saying that the temple was holy and a priest who had drunk wine was unholy and therefore disqualified from service, or He was saying that drinking wine would affect the priest's discernment and he would not be able to accurately differentiate between the holy and the unholy. In either case the priest was not to drink wine in the service of the Lord. The Christian is God's priest (I Peter 2:9 But ye *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light;) and he is constantly ministering in God's temple (II Corinthians 6:16 And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in *them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.). This being the case there is no time when it is appropriate for the Christian to indulge in the drinking of alcoholic wine.

Numbers 6:2,3,8 Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, When either man or woman shall separate *themselves* to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate *themselves* unto the Lord: He shall separate *himself* from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation he *is* holy unto the Lord.

The Nazarite was a person of Israel, man or woman, who set aside a part of his or her life to be especially dedicated to God. During the time of that vow the Nazarite was to leave the hair remain uncut, avoid dead bodies, and avoid wine in any form. While we are not under the law, and the vow of the Nazarite is no longer a part of God's instructions for us, a principle is defined.

Those whose lives are dedicated to holy living and service to God can find a three-fold application. By instructing the Nazarite to allow his hair to go uncut, God was asking the man to allow his physical appearance to be different and distinct from other Jews. The dedicated Christian should be willing to look and appear different from the world. Biblical commands on grooming, modesty, and sexual differentiation demand it. The Christian need not purposely look out of touch with style but every fashion and appearance decision must be made within the Scriptural guidelines of proper.

In the matter of the dead body, God was making a health regulation. Death of necessity included disease. Without the modern methods of sanitation the chance of serious infection was high when a person came in direct physical contact with a dead body. God wanted those dedicated to Him to remain in God health during the period of their vow. The dedicated Christian is thereby instructed to observe the rules of health and safety so that his/her life may be free from disease and thus more effective in serving Christ.

In the matter of the grape, God forbid contact because He wanted to preclude any chance of the Nazarite getting drunk and losing control of his mind or body, thus defiling himself. Christians need to be clearminded. The actions of the drunkard do no honor God. Medical science has proven that even the first drink begins to break down the drinker's moral resolve and motor skills. The world knows this. That is why alcohol is such a large part of the new morality. Those attempting to seduce another into immorality know that just a few drinks breaks down the barriers of morality in their target. God wants clear thinking, controlled minds and bodies in his service.

Deuteronomy 29:5-6 **And I have led you forty years in the wilderness: your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot. Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink: that ye might know that I *am* the Lord your God.**

God provided for all of Israel's needs while they were going through the wilderness. He did not supply them with wine or strong drink. God does not give wine nor strong drink to man. Alcoholic beverages are not natural. They are the result of the careful control of the fermentation process (rotting). Intoxicating wine did not appear on the human scene until after the flood of Noah. It is not the gift of God to men. It is man's taking something pure and turning it into something perverse.

I Samuel 1:12-16 **And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the Lord, that Eli marked her mouth. Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken. And Eli said unto her, How long wilt thou be drunken? put**

away thy wine from thee. And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I *am* a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the Lord. Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial: for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto.

Hannah considered it a disgrace "a daughter of Belial" to be considered to be one who had been drinking. If it is all right to drink then it ought to be all right to do it in church.

Proverbs 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.

Here God says plainly that intoxicating wine is the drink of fools. No one who treats alcohol as harmless has God's wisdom.

Proverbs 21:17 He that loveth pleasure *shall be* a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich.

God warns that wine will steal your wealth.

Proverbs 23:20 Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh:

Here is a direct command not to be in the company of wine drinkers.

Proverbs 23:29-35 Who hath woe? who hath sorrow? who hath contentions? who hath babbling? who hath wounds without cause? who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine. Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his colour in the cup, *when* it moveth itself aright. At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder. Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, *shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again.*

If there were no other statement in Scripture concerning wine other alcoholic beverages this passage would be sufficient to prove that God is against them. Here we have the description of wine which intoxicates and the helpless estate of the person who submits to it. Wine which is obviously alcoholic: clings to the cup, turns itself aright (has the gaseous motion of bubbles), which is red, which has a sting; is forbidden. Wine which causes a man to submit to lust, to lose control of himself, to get sick, to be addicted is absolutely forbidden.

Proverbs 31:4 *It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink:*

Since the Bible tells us that Christians are kings (Revelation 5:10 And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.) we should act the part. If an earthly king is to avoid intoxicating wine for the sake of his kingdom how much more is the Christian to forsake it for the sake of his?

Isaiah 5:11-13 Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, *that* they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, *till* wine inflame them!

And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands. Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because *they have no knowledge: and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst.*

One of the reasons that Israel was sent into captivity was their use of alcoholic wine.

Isaiah 5:22 Woe unto *them that are* mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink:

Wine, the juice of the grape, was concentrated for the purpose of storage. When needed it was reconstituted by mixing it with water, thus diluting the minor fermentation alcohol. The person who drank wine to get drunk purposely stored the wine in such a way as to produce and concentrate the alcohol. Wine here in this passage, because it includes the curse of God and the term "strong drink" which always refers to alcoholic beverages (other than grape products) is clearly alcoholic.

Isaiah 28:7-8 But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble *in* judgment. For all tables are full of vomit *and* filthiness, so that there is no place clean.

Here God again warns of the loss of judgment which alcoholic wine produces and condemns those foolish enough to use it. Filth and sickness are a very real part of alcohol.

Daniel 1:8 But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.

Daniel refused the king's meat because it was offered to idols. He refused the king's wine, which in Babylon was clearly alcoholic. Daniel knew that wine defiled the body and clouded the mind. As a man of God he wanted no part of it.

Hosea 4:11 Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart.

God places wine drinking (obviously alcoholic wine) in the same class as whoremongering. He warns that either will steal your heart. These two things that are destroying more lives, families, careers, and ministries than anything else. If the Bible did not teach total abstinence, good sense would!

Habbakkuk 2:15 Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, that putteth thy bottle to *him*, and makest *him* drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness!

God puts his indictment on the entire liquor industry. He states that the purpose of supplying alcohol is to strip the clothes and morality from others. The nudity of our time would not be possible without the alcohol industry. It's advertizing almost singlehandedly supports the pornography industry.

THEN WHAT ABOUT

Ephesians 5:19?

Ephesians 5:18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

Doesn't this verse say that as long as you don't drink to excess that its not wrong? No, it doesn't! The verse does not say "And be not drunk with wine in excess." It says that being drunk with wine causes a person to act in excess. The Christian is to be filled with the Holy Spirit instead. Any joy or any "strength" or any "nerve" that drinking alcohol can produce can be produced by the Holy Spirit. This verse teaches that as long as a Christian has access to the Holy Spirit (which is always) he has no reason to be drinking alcoholic wine.

The wedding of Cana?

Jesus produced between 100 and 160 gallons of wine at the wedding of Cana. The wedding had been in progress for 3 days and the guests had drunk every bit of wine the host had to offer. If the wine, and especially the wine that Jesus made, was alcoholic then Jesus was helping people to get drunk. He would be guilty of breaking the instruction of Habakkuk 2:15 and therefore of sin. If Jesus made alcohol at Cana then He was not the savior and we are still hell-bound sinners.

The Last Supper?

The last supper is recorded in 4 places: Mat. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; I Cor. 11:23-26. Not one time does the Bible say that "wine" was used. The Holy Spirit carefully guided the wording of these passages so that dishonest men could not use that which is sacred to justify their perversities.

I Timothy 5:23?

Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities.

In the attempt to "abstain from every appearance of evil" Timothy had obviously been avoiding any drink except water. Paul instructs him to take appropriate medical action to correct his health. Science has found that the juice of the grape is effective in combatting stomach viruses. An article in the December 4, 1977 Family Weekly said,

A little wine may be just the thing to shake off a virus. Science Magazine reports preliminary research by Canadian virologists indicates that the juice of grapes - fermented or plain - can inactivate viruses with which it comes in contact.

However, in the November, 1976 issue of Woman's Day magazine the following item appeared.

It is unwise to mix alcohol with illness. Liquor has an abrasive effect on tender tissues. Even though it may temporarily ease the pain ... it won't help the condition and may make it worse.

Paul could not be telling Timothy to drink alcoholic wine as that would make

Timothy's condition worse. Instead the instruction was to drink the unfermented juice of the grape which would help his body ward off the sickness.

Any Other Questionable Passage?

The rules of interpreting the Bible include one that says when there seems to be a contradiction between an ambiguous or confusing text and the clear teaching of the main body of Scripture let the questionable passage be explained by the clear.

Since it has been demonstrated that there is a clear teaching of Scripture that alcoholic beverages have no place in the life of the Christian any verse which seems to teach that they are permissible must be brought into agreement with it.

CONCLUSION

The drinking of alcoholic beverages is not a "gray area." The Bible is sufficiently clear on this matter. God is against it. Alcoholic beverages have no place in the life of a person who claims to be a spiritual Christian. The New Testament doctrine is summed up in the word NAPHALIOS *ναφάλιος* translated "sober." It means "without wine." Its meaning in classical Greek is "free from all wine" or total abstinence. It appears in 1 Timothy 3:2 as a requirement for a pastor.

"Without wine" is the right standard for a Christian. Only those who have hardened their hearts against this truth of God's word continue to imbibe and/or defend those who imbibe in alcoholic beverages.