

Should Christians Drink Alcohol?

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Why we don't Drink? - Proverbs 23

For more than 150 years the vast majority of those who have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour have abstained from Alcoholic drink. It was only a relatively small proportion of those who professed to be saved who retained to themselves what they felt to be the right to drink in moderation. Now however that seems to be changing and there are a number of publications which have been brought out which have dismissed the case for total abstinence somewhat contemptuously. And the result of that is that more and more Christians feel it is their right to drink Alcohol. It usually starts with a bottle of wine on the table and then it progresses to taking a little sherry on a social occasion and it may or may not progress from there.

But there obviously were reasons why God's people felt that they should stay away from alcoholic drink. And it was not only Christians who did this but there were many other people in society as well who felt that drink was so evil that they should not take it. In the Roman Catholic Church you have the Pioneers who also stand for total abstinence. And then there were those in society at large who believed in total abstinence. Perhaps the height of the social campaign came in the United States of America in the early years of the 20th Century when there was actually an amendment to the Constitution of the country which took away the right of brewers or vintners or retailers to sell alcoholic drink. This was known as Prohibition. Now we have moved very far away from that. The trend within Government at the moment is to liberalise the licensing laws so that more and more time is given for people to buy alcohol. And there has been a tendency in recent years for drinking to become more and more socially acceptable. And that is an attitude that has been brought about by the tremendous psychological pressure that has been exerted by the advertising industry. Everywhere you go today you are being bombarded with advertisements for beer. Millions of pounds are being spent on promoting drink. And they are not just adverts that say "Drink such and such a beer." or "Drink such and such a whiskey" Instead you have it portrayed as a social and a happy thing to do. I believe that nowhere is the advertisers skill more fully brought to bear than on presenting the drinking of alcohol as a healthy and happy thing. And this has had a tremendous success in spite of all the plain evidence that it is not true. And this brainwashing has been so successful that now people believe they cannot have a happy social occasion without drink. People really believe that if you are going to have a good social gathering it is going to be no good unless you have a few drinks. And the success of this kind of promotion is to be seen all around us with more and more young people turning to drink at younger and younger ages. And it is seen in the associated problems that come with it. And all the time there are fewer and fewer voices that are raised against it.

But when so many people took their stand against drink and so many people even apart from Christians were willing to stand out against this evil there must have been good reasons for it. I want to take a few minutes today to answer the question "Why don't we drink?" There are a number of reasons both Biblical and ethical why we should take such a stand. Let us see what the Bible and other evidence has to say about the drinking of alcohol.

I The Prohibition of Drink

The first thing that I want you to see in the Scripture about the drinking of Alcohol is its Prohibition. I believe that Biblical principles would condemn the kind of drink the modern drink industry produces today. Now let us look at the word of God and see what it says about strong drink.

Now the first thing that we need to realise as we deal with this topic is that there are a number of different types of wine in the Bible. First of all there was a non-alcoholic wine. I have read the advocates of social drinking say that there could have been no such thing as non-alcoholic wine in the times of the Bible. They have completely denied that it could be so. That is patently false. Do you remember the dream that Pharaoh's butler had that was interpreted by Joseph in the prison? He said "And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand". There is no doubt that this was just grape juice and would seem as though it was a fashionable thing for the Pharaoh's to drink this sort of non alcoholic wine. There is no danger in the use of non alcoholic grape juice.

But then there was obviously an alcoholic wine because we have many descriptions of people who got drunk as a result of taking it. And we find that people like Noah and others drank this. And so people say that it is all right. But let me point out a few things about the alcoholic wine in the Bible. The first thing that I want you to realise is that the process of distillation that we have today was not invented until about 700 years ago. The ordinary beverage that was produced in Bible times as a kind of a cottage industry would probably not have been more than 6% strength and it was often taken for reasons of gastric hygiene. It also would have been in limited supply as far as ordinary people were concerned. There would not have been vast amounts of it available. It was used at celebrations and special occasions. Now what we are dealing with when we look at alcoholic beverages in the Bible and what we are dealing with that comes from the modern drink industry are really two different things altogether. Distillation and modern brewing practices have given us something totally different from what they had in Bible times. So even if we were to accept that there were godly people in the times of the Bible who drank alcoholic beverage (and we will say more about that) we may not be able to go on to say that this allows us to take the alcohol that is available now because you are really talking about two completely different products. You are not talking about the same thing when you talk about the wine of the Bible and the produce of the modern drink industry.

But let us go on now and see what the Bible says about the kind of alcoholic drink they had in their day. There is a law of Biblical interpretation and that is the law of the first mention. This law states that when you find the first mention of something in the Bible you will always find the embryo of the teaching about that thing. The first mention of something in the Bible will help you to understand how that thing is to be regarded right through the Word of God. So we do well if we can look at the first mention of alcoholic drink in the Bible. You find that mention in Genesis 9:20-22. It says "And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father", and you notice how that the drinking of this drink is associated there with a fall. Noah the great man of faith, the man who believed God when the whole world did not believe is found in disgraceful circumstances and the reason of it is drink. He is brought to shame. And that is what Alcohol and drink does. It leads to shame! But it not only affected Noah but it affected his son Ham and his posterity. In verses 24 and 25 we read "And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had

done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren". The Holy Spirit draws a veil over what Ham's sin actually was but we know that it was sufficiently serious to warrant a curse upon Ham's race. That curse came as a direct result of drunkenness. So the first mention of alcoholic drink in the Bible associates it with sin and a curse.

The second mention establishes this. In Scripture the number two is the number of witness and the establishment of a witness. The Lord sent out his disciples by twos so that one witness could establish the witness of the other. The second mention of alcohol in the Bible is in Genesis 19:32-33 . There we read of wine as the devil's agent to work his wicked will. We read how Lot's daughters thought that they and their Father were the only people left in the world and so they got their Father drunk in order to do something immoral. Now you can read about that but what I am concerned about just now is to try to establish that the drinking of alcohol in the Bible is associated with sin and the curse. And there you have both the first and second mentions of the drinking of alcohol in the Bible and they are both given in a negative context. Now that certainly tells us something about the way the Lord looks at alcohol. But we can go further and we can cite the many texts of Scripture that warn against alcohol. Proverbs 20:1 says "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise". Then there is a whole passage in Proverbs 23. It says "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". And that is what alcohol does. It bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Again in Proverbs 31:4 we read, "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink". So there is a very clear warning stated in the Word of God about the consumption of strong drink. We should take note of it.

II The Promoters of Drink

But now I just want to talk to you about the Promoters of Drink because there are those who will come and they will argue about what I have just said and they will probably concede that the Bible would condemn drunkenness and it would condemn the effects of drink. Well I do not agree that the Bible just condemns drunkenness because it says "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: It does not say that the effect of wine is a mocker". It says that wine itself is a mocker. But there are those who will come now to try and bring Biblical justification as to why they can drink. There are two usual lines of argument. The first is that Paul told Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach's sake and the second is that the Lord turned water into wine at the marriage supper at Cana.

Let me answer those two arguments. What about Timothy being urged to use wine? Well no advocate of total abstinence from Alcohol would say that we cannot use alcohol as a medicine. There are many substances that we use as medicines that would be poisonous to us if they were used in too great a quantity but we take them in measured quantity to help us. And do you notice that Paul had to urge Timothy to take this wine. That would indicate to me that in the normal course of events that Timothy was an abstainer. Why would Paul have to tell him to take wine if he usually took it? And if Timothy did take wine then the wine that would have been good for his stomach would have had to have been a very weak wine. Scientists studying gastro enteritis have found that the best thing to drink for the problem is orange juice and after that unfermented grape juice. They found

that there was something in the grape juice that was of definite benefit in killing the bugs but that the more wine was fermented the more those bugs were killed off. So if you think you should take modern wine for your stomach then you are better sticking with the grape juice or far better with orange juice.

But then what about the Lord turning the water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana? There has been a controversy that has raged over whether the wine the Lord provided was alcoholic or not. And to be fair I would have to say that many people would say that it was alcoholic, including those who advocate total abstinence. However we have looked at the Bible's condemnation of drunkenness and we realise that the people at the wedding feast had already been drinking and I do not see how the Lord Jesus would have provided these people with the means of getting drunk. I do not see how the Lord would have done that. And we know from what the chief butler dreamed in the days of Joseph that it was the practice in the palace of the Pharaoh's to squeeze fresh grape juice and that this was what was drunk in high up circles. And I know that when it says that when they tasted the Lord's wine that they said they had kept the best wine to last that many people think that means it was more alcoholic but it might just mean that it tasted better.

And then we add into the mix not only the fact that Timothy was an abstainer but that he was a very close follower of Paul. In 2 Timothy 3:10 we read "But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience" and the word 'thou hast fully known' simply means that he followed closely. Timothy was a close follower of the apostle Paul and I believe that the fact that Timothy was an abstainer probably means that Paul was an abstainer. After all when Paul was setting out the qualifications of an elder or a bishop one of them was this "Not given to wine".

Now you look at all that. You see how the Old Testament condemns it and the evidence is that the elders and the apostles of the New Testament abstained from it and then try to say that the Lord provided alcoholic wine at Cana. Let me tell you that when I started preparing this message I myself might have said that he did but you know when you study it I can't see how it was so. We think of the Promoters of Drink

III The Potential of drink

But then could we think of the Potential of drink. The problem with the modern type of strong drink in particular is the potential it has to lead people into sin. And that is one of the reasons why God's people have stayed away from alcohol in the past. It leads people into sin.

For one thing the drinking clubs and the Public houses are places where drugs are passed and people are often enticed into gambling and other sins. In 1999 the Southern Baptists in America along with some other American Churches like the United Methodists in 2001 reaffirmed their advocacy of total abstinence. They looked at all the arguments and they still said that Christians should not drink. But Richard Land, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Church called alcohol "the gateway drug" to illicit drug use and abuse. He said that the alcohol problem was "America's number one drug problem". But then he said "Studies indicate 100 percent of the people who use illegal drugs started with alcohol," Alcohol is the way into drugs. Now I am not saying that all the people who drink will do drugs but what the studies show is that all of the people who do drugs started with drink. It is a gateway into these things.

And then not only is it a gateway into drugs and other immorality but it leads to violence. When the licensing hours were extended in the Republic of Ireland a few years ago it led to an increase in the amount of violent assaults and serious attacks. And we know that drink is related to a vast amount of the violence that takes place in families. It is worth noting that 33% of all divorces are drink related. And then drink has been the cause of an untold death toll. In 1995 the police in Northern Ireland said that there was at that time one alcohol related casualty every 12 hours. That is two in every 24 hour period. So drink is lethal!

It is the gateway to all sorts of evil. There are people who wake up after being under the influence of drink and they do not know what they have done. Now what I want to ask is if drink is a force for good or a force for evil? The New Testament is full of teaching that commands us to set a good example and be careful about the way we influence people and again if we are influencing people on the wrong road how are we going to stand before the Judge of all the earth? We think of what it may potentially do. And we have not even mentioned the danger of alcoholism. We think of the potential of drink.

IV The Pain of Drink

But then there is something else we should think of and that is the pain of drink. Drink brings pain. First of all it brings the pain of physical illness and ill health. Medical evidence shows that excessive alcohol consumption can cause brain damage, liver disease cancer and mental disorders. It was announced on 15 March 2001 that 40% of the emergency admissions in Ulster Hospitals are to do with alcohol. You think of the amount of time that is taken up by the health service in dealing with that amount of people. And the government is spending billions of Pounds on this problem. But it is not just the money and the time taken up by Doctors and nurses it is the pain and the illness. Alcohol is a depressant. It depresses you. But think of all the pain and the illness.

But not only do we think of the physical pain and illness but we think of the mental pain and anguish. I remember when the British Government proposed to amend the licensing laws in Northern Ireland to allow for the pubs to open on Sundays. I went round the village of Aughnacloy with a petition against it. And I went to a house and the woman was very willing to sign it and she wanted me to come in because her sister would want to sign it too. And I went in to meet the sister and the sister told me she was an alcoholic but she wanted to sign the petition because she did not want people to be able to get hold of booze. She said I can get it whenever I want. She said when you are an alcoholic you know how to get it but she knew the misery she was in and she did not want anybody else to go through that misery too. She said that when the drink took effect that she would be violent and hit out even at the people she loved. And I defy anyone to go to a woman like that and say that the drink does not cause pain. Drink is a deceiver. It is the first drink that the alcoholic ever took that was the worst one. I remember too that there were those who were only too glad to sign because they were glad of a day when their husband could not go to the Pub.

Now there is a passage that has a great bearing on how the child of God should act. It is 1 Corinthians 6:12. It says "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any". The word expedient is a word that means fitting. I wonder can you say that it is expedient then to drink? Can you say that it is fitting for a child of God to drink when you think of all the evil and the pain and the distress that comes out of it? Does it not blunt? Does it not take from you? Does it not put your testimony in danger? Those are the questions that you would need to ask. Should we have

anything to do with Satan's means of inflicting tragedy and failure and distress on millions of people in the world?

It was that burden that moved the 20 year old Fred Charrington in 1867. Fred Charrington had a millionaire income and he was the heir to the fortune of the Charrington Brewery. He was on his way one evening to teach a class of illiterate boys in London's East end and he saw a poor ragged woman with two children at her skirts crying outside a Pub called 'The Rising Sun' The woman went to the Pub door and called for her husband and he came out only to batter the woman and her two children to the ground. And as Fred Charrington looked on in horror he caught sight of his own family name emblazoned across the door of the Pub. He said to himself "That man has knocked his wife over and the same blow has knocked me out of the brewery business". And for the next 68 years of his life Fred Charrington became one of the best known Temperance campaigners in the country. It was the only response he could make as he looked at what drink was doing in the light of the commands of the New Testament. And it is the only thing that any of us can do. I know there is a campaign nowadays to make Christians like the world. Are we going to be like them in their misery and their heartache? Well if not let us resolve to stay away from the drink. The Lord will give us the strength and the wine of the fullness of the Holy Spirit is the only wine we need.