

Should Christians Drink Alcohol?

Proverbs 20.1: *Wine (yayin) makes men foolish, and strong drink (shekar) makes men come to blows; and whoever comes into error through these is not wise.*

Proverbs 23.31-32: *Keep your eyes from looking on the wine when it is red, when its colour is bright in the cup, when it goes smoothly down: In the end, its bite is like that of a snake, its wound like the wound of a poison-snake.*

Wine Drinking in New Testament Times

In New Testament times, the word "wine" was descriptive either of freshly squeezed grape juice (without fermentation) or wine mixed with water. This wine was fermented but heavily diluted. Scripture also makes a distinction between "wine" and "strong drink" (Luke 1.15).

Dilution

The amount wine was diluted is open to debate. Historians quote a number of different ratios, for example, 3 parts water to 1 part wine, and 2 parts water to 1 part wine. Occasionally the ratio was quoted as 1 to 1, but this mixture was referred to as "strong drink". The most relevant evidence in relation to NT times comes from Jewish historical records which state that during the Passover ritual, wine was to be mixed in a ratio of three parts water to one part wine. It was possible to become intoxicated from wine of this strength although it would take approximately 22 glasses!

"Strong Drink"

In Biblical times, the highest possible alcohol content was 14% which was achieved by fermentation. However, it should also be noted that the common wines of Palestine were only fermented for 3-4 days which would have produced an alcohol content of between 2 and 6%. In addition to this it was the custom to dilute this wine still further. The alcohol content of beers, wines and spirits **today** can be anywhere from 4-75%! This would be considered "strong drink".

In ancient times there were not many beverages that were safe to drink. The danger of drinking water alone raises another point. There were several ways in which the ancients could make water safe to drink. One method was boiling, but this was tedious and costly. Different methods of filtration were tried. The safest and easiest method of making the water safe to drink, however, was to mix it with wine. The drinking of wine (i.e., a mixture of water and wine) served therefore as a safety measure, since often the water available was not sanitary.

So, Should Christians Drink Alcohol?

Wine appears to have been sanctioned for Israelites in the Old Testament times as an everyday sanitary drink. However, in the New Testament there appear to be a number of clear exhortations to avoid the excesses of alcohol; a new standard was being called for. This would have been very different to the Jew who was accustomed to drinking diluted wine as permitted under the old order. As such the NT does not bring an immediate command, but rather a recommendation of abstinence to cater for the "weak" brother (cf. Romans 14.1, 1 Corinthians 8.11-12). In addition, the great evil that alcohol and its associated industry has become today was not then apparent.

Sin

Without doubt, wine and strong drink are often associated with sin, especially immorality and sexual sins. The first occurrence of the word "wine" in Scripture is associated with just such a subject (Noah, Genesis 9.21, cf. Lot, Genesis 19.32). Other Scriptures also indicate the sinful effects of consuming alcohol:

<i>Scripture</i>	<i>Consequence</i>
Proverbs 31.4-7	Slows the thinking process, clouds personal judgement, causes forgetfulness
Habakkuk 2.5	Self-centeredness and pride
Proverbs 21.17	Poverty
Genesis 9.20-25, Joel 3.3	Laziness and sexual immorality
Proverbs 23.29-35	Sorrow, arguments, grief, injury
Jeremiah 23.9	Brokenness, a crippled wreck
Isaiah 16.9-10	Sadness and depression
Jeremiah 51.7	Insanity

It should be remembered that wine can be used for positive reasons. For example, in 2 Samuel 6.2 it is used to refresh the exhausted and as an antiseptic (Luke 10.34) or medicinal aid (1 Timothy 5.23).

Separation

In the OT, God required that kings and priests on Tabernacle duty should abstain from alcohol.

*Leviticus 10.9-10: 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: And that ye may put difference between **holy** and unholy, and between unclean and **clean**.*

Note the importance of avoiding wine or strong drink: it would emphasise the distinctiveness of God's people as holy and clean. As believers, we are now the NT kings and priests officiating in God's temple and have the responsibility of bringing glory to Him through our lives (1 Peter 2.9).

Abstaining from alcohol is often emphasised in relation to those seeking to live separated and consecrated lives for God. Note the Nazarite (Numbers 6.2-3) and also Timothy: *1 Timothy 5.23: Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities*. Timothy did not drink even diluted "wine" but was encouraged to do so by the Apostle Paul as a medicinal aid. This would suggest that the Apostle Paul himself abstained from alcohol as Timothy was a close follower of Paul's example in his life and testimony (2 Timothy 3.10-11, 2 Thessalonians 3.9).

The Scripture teaches that those who will be totally dedicated to God should abstain from alcohol (i.e. the Nazarite, Numbers 6). It is also interesting that elders are to be "not given to wine" (meaning 'not at wine' or 'not beside wine'), whereas deacons are to be "not given to much wine". The indication is that elders were to set the example through abstinence.

Symbol

In the OT, wine is often a symbol of joy, successful harvest and prosperity (cf. Psalm 104.14-15, Proverbs 3.10).

However, in the NT it is often used as a symbol of wrath, judgment and wickedness (Revelation 14.8). Revelation 18.13 also lists wine as one of those things which is a luxury of a wicked world system which captures and enslaves the souls of men.

In addition, the word "wine" is not employed in relation to the Lord's Supper. Only the terms "cup" and "fruit of the vine" are used (cf. Matthew 26.29, 1 Corinthians 11.25). We cannot be sure what kind of wine was used in the cup, however it was symbolic of the "blood of the **new** testament" (Mark 14.24). The word "new" means 'new in character', i.e. different. As such, it may well have been different wine to that used at the Passover. Note also that the cup represents the precious blood of the Lord Jesus. Unfermented wine would be an appropriate **new** symbol of the blood of the spotless, pure Lamb of God.

Sober

Believers are often exhorted to be "sober". The word means 'to be free from intoxicants' and 'to abstain from wine'.

1 Thessalonians 5.6: Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. Note also that we are to "watch" ('keep awake' or 'be fully vigilant'); something which is difficult when intoxicated!

Stumble

As believers we must seek to set an example in our Christian lives, not only to the world, but also to other believers (2 Corinthians 6.3-4). There are many vulnerable Christians and we must have an intense concern about the possible consequences of leading other believers into the use of alcohol (2 Corinthians 11.29).

Society

Heavy social drinking was not tolerated or accepted during OT times. Scripture clearly speaks against such activities, and even association with them: *Proverbs 23.20: Be not among winebibbers* (those that give themselves to wine).

*The fact of the matter seems to be that **total abstinence** from "**strong drink**" is God's expectation for all believers. Total abstinence from **all wine** was the ideal for all believers and was exemplified by spiritual leaders. In today's climate, alcohol and its associated industries have become associated with cruelty, wickedness, immorality and a central part of Satan's evil world system. As such we should seek to separate ourselves from every appearance of this evil (Ephesians 5.8, 11, 12.9).*