

WHAT DOES GOD REALLY SAY ABOUT “DRINKING”?

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON ALCOHOL

PREFACE

In our western culture today, the topic of drinking raises many strong opinions from the secular and the religious world. With many good reasons, some are adamant that all forms of alcohol are dangerous. A loved-ones life lost on the highway to a drunk driver will definitely shape one's opinion of alcohol and drinking. An abusive father or a marriage torn apart by alcoholism will leave a mark on a heart forever. These are real and tragic results of the use of alcohol.

However, despite the danger of abuse, as the Church of Jesus Christ, we must give correct teaching on this subject. There is danger in the abuse of alcohol. There is also an equally powerful danger in legalism. Legalism is anything which shackles man to the belief that our right performance gains us right standing before God. Unless we teach the fullness of God's Word in context with the whole of scripture and the grace found in Jesus Christ, we run the risk of abusing the Words of God and keeping lives from freedom in Christ. To that end, what does the Word of God, the Bible, really have to say about drinking.

Throughout the ages, most people with opinions have fallen into one of three camps: Prohibitionist, Abstentionists, and Moderationists. Taking a look at each of these group's beliefs in light of God's Word will give us a good back drop for this discussion.

PROHIBITIONS

Prohibitionists teach that all drinking is a sin and that alcohol itself is an evil.

Citing real statistics about drunk-driving deaths and family dysfunction, prohibitionists see alcohol as the devil's brew. They see alcohol as vile as pornography and stealing: it is always wrong. While there is much merit in understanding the problem alcohol has caused our society, we must go back to the Scripture to see if God views alcohol in this way.

- Psalm 104:14-15 He [God] makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate-bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man...

In these verses God says that he gave wine to make our hearts glad. God gave wine, not the devil. The Psalms are simply songs of worship to God. The sense from these verses then, is that alcohol can be used not only an honorable way, but the most honorable way: Worship to the God who gives good things to His kids.

- John 2:1-11 is clear that Jesus' first miracle was turning over 100 gallons of water into wine at a wedding party.

This verse is especially troubling because it appears that the wedding party was already “half-lit” when Jesus performed this miracle. If alcohol is evil, how do we deal with the Son of God miraculously creating it from water?

- Matthew 11:19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." ' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

In a drunken and depraved culture not unlike our own, Jesus drank alcohol. He feasted on good food. He went to parties, hung out with prostitutes, and in doing so annoyed religious leaders. He never equated the proper use of alcohol with evil.

Some Prohibitionists will say that the wine Jesus and the first century Jews drank was like grape juice and non-alcoholic. All historical research outside the Bible (Josephus [Jew], Pliny the Great and Pliny the Less [Romans]) by non-believers confirms that wine made in first century Palestine indeed was some of the best in the world and had a normal alcoholic content. Even the Bible makes this statement about the wine of Jesus' time and the effects people think it had on Jesus,

“³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ ³⁴ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ ” (Luke 7:33-34)

Obviously, the people of Jesus' day believed the wine Jesus drank would make Him act like a drunkard because it contained alcohol that could make one drunk. While we know that Jesus did not sin and drunkenness is clearly a sin, (Romans 13:13, Galatians 5:21) we do know that Jesus drank wine with alcohol in it. This is stated quite obviously and as a matter of fact in the Scripture. (Luke 7:33-34, Matt. 26:27-29)

Prohibitionists stay safe with their doctrine about alcohol being evil, and thus do not experience the dangers of alcohol. However, this position does not seem to square with Scripture. Therefore, their position has to be based on opinion, tradition, or a misuse of the Scripture. Using any of these as a basis for doctrine and behavior is wrong and ultimately leads to further issues.

ABSTENTIONISTS

Abstentionists teach that drinking is not sinful, but that all Christians should avoid drinking out of love for others and a desire to not cause anyone to stumble.

- Hosea 2:8 She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold-which they used for Baal.

This verse seems to indicate that God gives food, wine and silver to be used for worship. The temptation in Hosea's day, as it is for ours, is to take what God has given and worship it or use it to worship ourselves.

- Matthew 11:19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners." ' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

In a culture of alcohol abuse, Jesus didn't seem to worry about causing others to stumble when he drank. We know that every choice Jesus made on the earth was based on his mission to "seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). As I read the gospels, it seemed like Christ's choice to go to parties, eat rich food and drink alcohol formed a bridge between him and the lost, not a barrier: "wisdom is proved right by her actions". Could it be the same in many of the cultures in which we live?

- I Tim. 4:1-5 The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron. They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth. For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is

received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.

The most dangerous enemy to our relationship with Christ is legalism. Legalism is most often defined in the New Testament as “basing any of your standing before God (your righteousness) on something you do or don’t do.” Legalism in a social sense is being stricter than God about what He commands and permits. It is the making of fences to keep from breaking the Law and in doing so, making the fences Law for yourself and everyone else. The Scripture gives us stern warning to not fall into the trap of legalism (Acts 15:10-11, Galatians 5:1, Titus 1:10-11).

• I Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

The issue is not what we eat and drink but why we eat and drink. Are we gluttons? Do we eat to feel better or because we are bored? Do we drink to escape problems or to morph into some alter-ego? Everything we do, from working to sleeping, should be done with a view of glorifying God.

Abstentionists are right in their desire to not cause anyone to stumble. Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 10 warn us against using personal freedom in a way that hurts others. However, it seems like this position goes further than God has in its strictness and infringes upon the freedom that God has promised His children in His Word.

MODERATIONISTS

Moderationists teach that drinking is not a sin and that Christian conscience must guide each person.

These scriptures speak in part what the Bible says in volume about this issue.

- Wine is spoken of as both good and bad in the same verses (I Samuel 1:14, 24; 25:18, 37; Joel 1:5,10).
- Apart from good feasting, alcohol in Scripture is rightly used for communion (Matt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:1 😊), medicinal purposes (Prov. 31:6; I Timothy 5:23), and O.T worship (Num. 28:14).
- Proverbs 3:9-10 Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.
- Ecclesiastes 9:7 Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart..
- Psalm 104:14-15 He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate-bringing forth food from the earth: wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread that sustains his heart.
- Deut. 14:26 Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice.

Drinking alcohol is equated with worship most of the time in the Bible. We see it in Psalms and here in Deuteronomy. We even see it in communion, the most sacred meal for Christ-followers.

• Romans 14:1-15:2 This whole discussion falls into the realm of the weaker brother principle found in this text. Careful exegesis is the only way to resolve issues like this. In this text there are several principles that can be applied to the issue of drinking alcohol:

1. In the text there is a specific weaker brother, not someone whom you don’t know that might be annoyed (Romans 14:1). One of the arguments for making a law against drinking alcohol is that if someone who is unknown by a Christian sees that Christian drinking in public, he might be offended. This argument gets ridiculous when played out with other issues. For instance, what if a vegetarian

with strong convictions about not eating meat sees another Christian eating a steak and gets offended? Should that Christian not enjoy a nice steak in a nice restaurant? Of course not, because the Bible is clear that eating all kinds of meat is permissible (Mark 7:19). Many Christians in the name of “abstaining from every appearance of evil” say that any Christian should not do anything that might be interpreted as “an appearance of evil.” First of all, that interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 5:21 is not totally accurate. The context of abstaining for the appearance of evil is in regard to testing someone who stands up in church and claims to be speaking from God by prophetic utterance. There is no mention of any social issues in the context. Second, one must make the case Biblically that drinking is evil – sinful and of Satan. As we have already seen in the “Prohibitionist” section, this view cannot be Biblically supported as evil. Drinking cannot therefore be deemed as “evil”.

With that aside, the whole line of reasoning sets up the potential for great legalism. Why? Because I know people who get annoyed at a variety of things. I know people who refuse to wear name-brand clothing and look with disdain at those who do. I know people who think with the “appearance of evil” argument that going to questionable movies (and they get to decide what questionable is) is wrong. There are people who will not eat meat or non-organic foods and look side-ways at those who do. This argument about not drinking alcohol because of offending a random person, when played out, infringes on the freedom God has given us as followers of Christ. In addition, we cannot make our fences (that which we set up not to sin) God’s laws when they are not God’s laws.

2. The text says that a Christian’s conscience guides their personal behavior, not another’s conscience (Romans 14:5). In the context, weaker people (those who get offended at eating meat) are not allowed to tell the strong people (those who have freedom to eat meat) how to live. And vice-versa. About, neutral, non-moral issues, there is freedom. That freedom must be protected whether you are the weaker or stronger brother or sister. Paul says it this way in similar context to our text, “why is my freedom judged by another’s conscience? If I partake (of meat) with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:29-31). Abstaining from one’s freedom to honor another’s conscience is something a Christian does out of love. It is not something that can be demanded by someone with differing preferences about neutral, non-moral issues.

3. The word stumble has the idea of causing someone to sin, not just be annoyed (Romans 14:21). I am annoyed at many things: people who don’t like baseball, Christian bookstores and cats. However, none of these things cause me to sin. The word ‘stumble’ which is used in our text, is the Greek word Skandalon which means to set a trap for someone to fall. There is a difference in causing someone to stumble (laying a trap for them to sin) and annoying someone (violating their personal preferences).

An example of both of these would be if one couple was inviting several couples over for a dinner party. Couple “A” who is throwing the party has beer, wine, and cocktails available for dinner and everyone partakes. However, one couple is offended by the cocktails because this speaks of heavy alcohol and this is across the line for them. Has couple “A” sinned by offering? Has couple “C” who took the cocktails sinned by drinking them? Again, the scripture must be our basis for sin. Drunkenness is the line – not the type of drink. So, this is simply a case of someone being annoyed at a brother’s actions. It did not cause them or anyone else to sin.

However, let’s say that couple “A” finds out ahead of time that couple “B” who will be attending are both recovering alcoholics. What should they do? To offer drinks at their party may not be a sin, especially if they let couple “B” know ahead of time. However, to offer drinks to couple “B” at the party would be a stumbling block. This could lead a brother and sister to sin who obviously have a

sin issue in this area.

4. Sometimes preferences are cultural rooted. I was a Youth Minister in a church where wearing a hat was wrong. Was it a sin? Well it depended on who you asked? However, could this be based on any scripture? No! This was simply the tradition and culture of the south. So, to blend with the culture I usually asked kids to remove their caps in church. However, one young man was going bald at 16 and wore his cap into church often. I let him leave his hat on because I believed his worth as a child of God did not need a further beating from cruel teenagers (yes “churched” teens can be cruel). One elderly woman ripped it off his head and chewed him out. Now I ask the question – who sinned in the eyes of God according to His scripture? I’m not sure that he did since I (an authority in the church acting under a Pastoral OK) had given the green light to his cap wearing escapade in the church. I tend to think based on this and many other scriptures from God’s Word that she did – “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” - Ephesians 4:29

5. Romans was written to the whole church at Rome, including its leaders (Romans 1:7, Romans 16:1-15). The point is that Paul doesn’t seem to give a different standard for how pastors or leaders deal with non-moral, personal freedom issues. And we know from other pertinent texts on the qualifications of being an elder (1 Timothy 3:3, Titus 1:7) that the issue is not the drinking of alcohol, but addiction to alcohol.

I believe the moderationist position is the most favored position because it seems to me to be the most in line with the whole of Scripture. It respects the tension in the Scripture and honors the conscience of individual believers. I believe that in many cultures in the world alcohol is indeed a bridge to ministry and not a barrier. Just like with all other elements in culture, we must partake carefully with a view to redeem what is in need of redemption. Could it be that rightly consuming alcohol is not only a great way to worship the God who gives all good things to his kids, but also a powerful way to connect with our friends around us who need to know Christ?

[This material comes from Kenneth L. Gentry’s book “God Gave Wine”, writing by Darren Patrick – Lead Pastor of the Journey Church, and additional research and writing by John Ryan – Preaching Pastor at Summit Community Church.]