

DOES THE BIBLE  
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BEVERAGES?

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# DOES THE BIBLE CONDONE ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES?

Fundamentalists find themselves in a difficult and awkward position concerning alcoholic beverages. By instinct, tradition and Biblical principle they are convinced that believers should abstain entirely. Yet that position is under strong attack today by others who also claim to believe the Bible. The New Evangelical trend is toward “social drinking” as an acceptable practice for Christians, and they point to the Word of God for support. Besides numerous Old Testament passages that speak favorably of wine (for example, Jud 9:13; Ps 104:15; Gen. 14:18), the New Testament seems to permit the use of wine, even for church leaders (I Tim. 3:8; 5:23). The only Biblical restriction, according to this position, is excessive drinking that leads to drunkenness. How should we respond to these arguments? Must we leave this matter to “personal convictions?” Or is there a standard for God's people to follow? As always, the Fundamentalist must turn to the Bible for the answers.

## The Practices of Drinking

The first step in coming to a Biblical view of alcoholic beverages is to interpret the Bible historically. Was wine in the Bible the same as wine today? In other words, we must be sure we are comparing the proverbial “apples to apples” (or in this case, “grapes to grapes”).

### Alcoholic Beverages in the Biblical World

By far the easiest way to deal with this issue is to deny the alcoholic content of wine in the Bible. Perhaps it was only fresh grape juice. Unfortunately, the Bible will not support that conclusion. The usual words for wine in the Bible occur in some contexts that demand an alcoholic content. For instance, without the presence of alcohol to fight bacteria, there would be no benefit in pouring wine on open wounds (Luke 10:34) or in treating stomach disorders (I Tim 5:23). Furthermore, there would be no possibility of intoxication (Gen 9:21; Pro 23:29-35; Eph 5:18). With the possible exception of *fruit of the vine*, there are no Biblical terms that clearly and consistently distinguish fermented wine from unfermented juice. In fact, without refrigeration or pressurized bottling, unfermented grape juice was only available immediately after grape harvest.

Fermentation is a natural process that takes place when grape juice comes into contact with the yeast released from broken grape skins (during the *treading* of grapes). Under normal conditions the resulting wine will contain no more than 7% alcohol. According to secular authorities, people in Bible times would dilute this wine with at least two parts water (sometimes with as much as twenty parts water), reducing the alcohol to less than 2 1/2%:

“In all these countries [Syria, Palestine, Egypt], wine was always diluted with water, a long-standing custom in Mediterranean regions, where pure potable water is not very common.” (R. J. Forbes, Professor of the History of Pure and Applied Sciences in Antiquity, University of Amsterdam, in *Encyclopedia Americana*, 29:44-45, 1989).

“The wine of classical antiquity, however, was very different from modern wine. They . . . always diluted it with water before consumption . . . Only barbarians drank undiluted wine.” (Maynard A. Amerine, *Collier's Encyclopedia*, 1994, vol. 23, p. 518)

The reason for this mixture of wine was very practical: pure drinking water was scarce. Even today travelers to the Holy Land must be careful about drinking the water. In the ancient world they discovered that

the alcohol in wine killed enough of the harmful bacteria to make the water acceptable. The resulting mixture, however, was more like water than wine. At this alcohol level the average person would have to consume nearly a gallon of the mixture to become intoxicated! The same is true for other varieties of wine in the Bible. *Mixed wine* (Pro 23:30) was wine flavored with herbs, and *strong drink* (Deut. 14:26; Luke 1:15) was the fermented juice of other fruits (*strong* refers to the flavor, not the alcoholic content). In every case, the wine was diluted with water. It is the use of undiluted wine, with its deep red color, that Scripture condemns as dangerous (Pro 23:31).

### **Alcoholic Beverages in the Modern World**

While the goal in the ancient world was to *reduce* the alcoholic content of beverages, the modern world has sought ways to *increase* it. Standard table wines have as much as 14% alcohol due to the addition of extra yeast and the control of the heat generated by the fermentation process. Of course, wine is not diluted today, so that modern wine has more than *five times* as much alcohol as the diluted wine of the ancient world. Furthermore, fortified wines such as port or sherry have alcohol *added*, resulting in an alcoholic content of 18 to 24%. Hard liquor produced by distillation, such as vodka or gin, has as much as 40% alcohol. Even beer, produced by the fermentation of cereal grains, contains 4 to 7% alcohol. While this approximates the amount in naturally fermented wine, it is of course never diluted. In fact, each of these modern categories of alcoholic beverages, when consumed in their standard serving sizes, contains about the same amount of alcohol. That is, an average drink = 5 ounces of wine = 12 ounces of beer = 1 1/2 ounces of whiskey = 0.6 ounces of pure alcohol. That would be more than *three times* the alcohol contained in an 8-ounce cup of diluted wine in Bible times. Clearly wine today is *not* the same as wine in the Bible.

A second important difference is the purpose for using alcoholic beverages. In Bible times the purpose was to purify their drinking water. In our world good drinking water is usually available. Instead, most people who drink alcoholic beverages today do so either because they like the effect of the alcohol or because they want to be accepted by others. Alcohol today is not so much a beverage as it is a planned intoxicant, exactly the use prohibited in the Bible. And with the higher levels of alcohol, intoxication and even alcohol dependence can be difficult to avoid. Currently there are an estimated 10 million alcoholics in the United States and another 10 million categorized as problem drinkers. National surveys reveal that alcohol is involved in as many as 65% of the murders committed in the United States, 40% of the assaults, 35% of rapes, 55% of domestic violence, 60% of child abuse cases, and 60% of all traffic fatalities. The use of alcohol in our society is a raging menace never imagined, permitted or encouraged in the Bible.

## **The Problems of Drinking**

Both in the ancient world and in the modern world there are serious problems associated with alcohol. The Bible recognizes these problems and urges God's people to avoid them.

### **Personal Problems**

Those who love wine are susceptible to the *loss of resources* (Pro 21:17) as they spend their money and time on its purchase and pleasure. The annual consumption of alcoholic beverages in the United States has reached 2.7 gallons of pure alcohol for every person 14 years of age and older, the equivalent of 591 beers each (a substantial financial expenditure).

Alcohol also causes the *loss of discernment*. Isaiah knew of individuals who "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" (Is 28:7). Modern medical research has proven that even a few drinks impair mental ability.

The *loss of control* is probably the most dangerous result of alcohol use. Even a godly individual like Noah found that alcohol can lead to sin, shame and family divisions (Gen 9:21). Today the loss of control seen in drunken driving is a serious problem facing our nation.

## **Spiritual Problems**

There are also serious spiritual problems associated in God's Word with the use of alcohol, problems that ought to make any believer shudder. First, wine is on the same level with sexual immorality in its ability to turn the heart of a person away from the Lord (Hos 4:11). That is, it can cause a *lack of love* for God. Second, it can promote a *lack of service* for God. Matthew 24:48-51 pictures a servant who loses sight of the Lord's return and turns to drinking instead of fulfilling his service for the Master. Third, the abuse of alcohol can indicate a *lack of relationship* with the Lord. Drunkards are regularly included in the New Testament lists of those who shall not "inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor 6:10). Should God's people be playing with such a dangerous substance?

## **The Prohibitions of Drinking**

So far it is clear that alcoholic beverages come with a serious set of problems that would seem to be sufficient to convince any believer to abstain. But Scripture also contains some clear commands concerning drinking that turn this issue into a matter of obedience or disobedience.

### **General Prohibitions**

Christ frequently warned His disciples to be alert for His second coming. Together with the pleasures and cares of this life, drunkenness can dampen our expectation and weaken our preparation of Christ (Luke 21:34). Do not let alcohol *divert your attention* from Christ!

This influence of alcohol on our life is not the only consideration. Given the weakness and inability of so many to withstand and control the effects of alcohol, God commands us to abstain lest we corrupt others (Rom 14:21). Do not let alcohol *destroy your brother!*

No one ever took his first drink expecting or planning to become an alcoholic. There is a subtle deception about alcohol that leads people to believe that nothing bad will happen to them. Scripture says the one who believes that lie is a fool (Pro 20:1). Do not let alcohol *deceive yourself!*

### **Specific Prohibitions**

While the Bible does not prohibit the use of wine for people in general (assuming the proper dilution), there are three classes of people for whom no amount of alcohol is allowed. The *priests* serving in the tabernacle should not use alcohol lest it hinder their ability to communicate the truth of God's Word to others (Lev 10:9-11). *Kings* should not use alcohol lest it distort their ability to discern what is right (Pro 31:4-5). And *Nazirites* should not use alcohol lest it deter their dedication to the Lord (Num 6:3).

Those are not outdated Old Testament categories. God has designated believers today as "kings and priests" (Rev 1:5-6) and calls on us to dedicate ourselves to serve Him (Luke 9:23). God's standards for His kings, priests and dedicated servants are at least as high today as they were then. The only question is, are we willing to submit to His will and His Word. Consider carefully the Apostle Paul's exhortation:

"The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof" (Rom 13:12-14).