

# IS IT A SIN FOR A CHRISTIAN TO DRINK ALCOHOL?

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**Many Christians believe it is sinful to use alcoholic drinks; but what is the biblical teaching on this? This much-needed article will consider wine, beer, spirit-drinks and alcoholism within a Christian and biblical context and lifestyle .... *Be Prepared for surprises!***

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I once heard of a southern baptist minister in the United States being fired from his post after it was discovered that, '*...He secretly indulged in alcoholism...*' I was surprised about this because I had heard of this man and his work, so I asked a U.S.-based contact to get the facts; apparently, it was discovered that this man enjoyed a glass of beer with his Sunday lunch most Sundays (but not every Sunday) and this was "*discovered*" after the car of one of his church members broke down right outside his house and the member was invited into his house to ring the local motor mechanic (motor fitter, as we Brits say). Apparently the sight of a glass of beer beside this man's dinner was sufficient to convict him of "alcoholism." This was soon corroborated by two ladies in the congregation who thought that they had detected the smell of beer on his breath on two or three occasions (over 5 years).

Do I need to say more about such vindictive and legalist judgmentalism being applied to a man who had (apparently) faithfully served this congregation for five years? I think not. We need to look at this subject of the use of alcohol in a Christian's life much more deeply.

## The Old Testament Approach

It is an undeniable fact that many Christians of our day are woefully unknowledgable about the Old Testament. Many are surprised when told that the Old Testament is *almost wholly positive* about wine and 'strong drink' (although obviously there are warnings and a few lamentable examples of the drunkenness which is to be avoided).

A typical approach is in Deuteronomy 7:13 where the 'blessings' which the Lord would grant Israel, if they were obedient, included many children, wonderful crops and herds and.... '*new wine and oil*' In fact, the Israelites were encouraged to produce wine as a symbol of the blessings of God. When keeping the autumn-time Feast of Tabernacles, the Israelites were especially *commanded* to behave joyfully:

*'You shall observe the Feast of Tabernacles seven days, when you have gathered from your threshing floor and from your WINEPRESS'* (Deuteronomy 16:13, NKJV, my emphasis)

After being given instructions to save their tithe carefully for their feasts, the Israelites were told:

*'Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink ('strong drink' KJV), or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice'* (Deuteronomy 14:26, NIV)

I am glad that the NIV has here restored the sense of the original Hebrew from the KJV (which the NKJV had lost), 'strong drink', or, 'fermented drink' (Hebrew: 'shekar': '*intensely alcoholic drink*'; Hebrew word number 7941 in Strongs) was a spirit drink probably something like Rum or Whisky and almost certainly made from dates; it was extremely strong! The Israelites were *encouraged* to drink wine or 'strong drink' when they feasted before the Lord (this is in complete contrast to a remark recently made to me by another Christian in which he stated that it is only acceptable to drink alcohol for 'medicinal purposes' but *never* for enjoyment!) Of course, wine was also involved in the 'drink offerings' at the tabernacle! (Exodus 29:40, Leviticus 23:13). Judges 9:13 speaks of wine as that which '*...Cheers both God and men...*'

Wine continues to be symbolic of great blessings in Isaiah:

*'And in this mountain The LORD of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wine on the lees'* (Isaiah 25:6)

## But Was This Real Wine?

Some have claimed that the wine of the Old and New Testaments was simply grape juice. Unfortunately their argument does not stand up even under the mildest scrutiny! Good Hebrew wine and 'Strong Drink' (a potent drink probably made from dates) were quite noted. Grapes would not 'keep' unless they were turned into wine. Again, why would books like Proverbs often warn about the abuse of alcohol and drunkenness if this was only grape juice? The last quoted Scripture also shows that this was not grape juice, for '*lees*' is the sediment produced by a *fermenting* liquid! Others have 'split hairs' in claiming that the Hebrew word used for

'new wine' refers to grape juice, but they now appear to have conclusively lost the argument because:

1. Often that particular word is certainly used of fermented wine, as in Genesis 27:28, Hosea 4:11 and Micah 6:15.
2. The Ugaritic parallel term was certainly used of real wine.
3. The Septuagint (the Old Testament translated into Greek) equivalent words *always* refer to fermented wine.
4. The Mishna provides *no evidence* that the Hebrews *ever* used unfermented wine.

### The New Testament

While still occasionally warning of drunkenness, the New Testament continues the Old Testament approach of being *entirely positive* towards the use of wine.

While many "religious" type Christians are continually embarrassed that Jesus chose to turn water into wine at the wedding of Cana, there is no doubt that this wine was normal alcoholic wine (Greek: 'oinos,' Greek word number 3631 in Strongs).

Quite obviously, Jesus did not think it wrong to enjoy drinking wine at a wedding, yet I once heard a very sincere (but somewhat foolish) old lady say that she intended scolding Jesus about turning water into wine when she got to Heaven!

Jesus is also plainly quite unembarrassed about using the metaphor of putting '*new wine into new wine-skins*' In Luke 5:37-39 (by the way this was clearly a reference to real, alcoholic wine which can burst weak containers!).

In fact, the word 'wine' occurs 37 times in the New Testament and is only used negatively (in association with drunkenness and excess) on 7 of these occasions!

I also once heard somebody say, '*We can be sure that Jesus never touched a drop of alcohol!*' - is that really so? But wine, sometimes with a little water added, was as much part of normal life in the world which Jesus inhabited as tea and coffee are in Britain and America today. But if a few still feel that the lips of Jesus were surely '*unsullied*' by wine, Luke 7:33 must come as a shock to them:

*'For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man has come EATING AND DRINKING, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a WINEBIBBER, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"'* (Luke 7:33, NKJV, my emphasis)

I think this removes any doubt: Jesus plainly occasionally enjoyed a glass of wine!

But there is even more than this: The New Testament also clearly teaches that real wine should be used in communion (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), even though thousands of modern Christians seem to think that they know better and will use almost anything rather than real wine. For instance, here in the UK I have even heard of cases where 'Ribena' is used for communion - *Yuk!!* (Ribena is a very sweet, syrupy blackcurrant drink). Whilst there is probably nothing wrong with using pure red grape juice, if Jesus has instructed the use of wine why do we not use it? Of course, a few do use real wine but a majority seem to use so-called '*communion wine*' (which - a lot of the time - is not real wine at all).

### The History of Alcohol in the Church

The early Christians always used wine following the biblical example. This probably continued for hundreds of years, until the rise of the Puritans in England; they observed the misuse of wine and alcohol and started to wonder whether Christians should ever take alcoholic beverages, nevertheless many Christians undoubtedly continued to drink alcohol, though strictly in moderation. A more organized anti-alcohol stance emerged with John Wesley in the 18th century and the new rigorist Methodism which followed Wesley started to outlaw the use of alcohol among Methodists. This influence spread to most fundamentalist chapel-goers, whether Methodist or Baptist. The Salvation Army (which emerged from Methodism) was probably the most anti-alcohol Christian movement of all. William Booth was only too happy to re-affirm Methodism's drinking ban for members when he observed - at first hand - the dreadful suffering involved in much of the alcoholism of London's infamous East End. Apparently Booth completely lost sight of the fact that *all* of God's blessings to Mankind (food, prosperity, sexual love etc) can be abused where sinful lifestyles predominate, and he had at his fingertips a book, the Holy Bible, which while certainly warning against drunkenness, continually paints wine in a very positive color.

But a huge area of Christendom has been largely unaffected by this anti-alcohol movement; Roman Catholicism, Episcopalianism and Greek and Eastern Orthodoxy mostly continue to see the moderate enjoyment of alcohol as a very positive thing. I may also say that perhaps a majority of modern British and European evangelicals see the moderate use of wine as a blessing.

### Christian Ministers and the 'Nazarite' Argument

Some say that if those under the Nazarite vow were not allowed to drink alcohol since they were set apart for the Lord, neither should Christian Ministers in our day. How about this argument?

The first thing to say is that since we only read of 3 or 4 Nazarites throughout the entire Holy Bible, it is difficult to draw any hard and fast rules about them. Certainly they were barred from taking alcoholic drinks as John the Baptist was (Luke 1:15), but Nazarites were apparently directly appointed by God. It is also true to say that the Levites were to ensure that they were never intoxicated when carrying out their duties under the Old Covenant.

But quite plainly Jesus *did not* apply the Nazarite code to Himself and He *did* drink (as we have seen). But we don't need to be in the dark about this, or wonder whether the Nazarite 'no-drink' rule should apply to Christian ministers since the apostle Paul directly discusses the behavioural standards of ministers in the New Testament. Does Paul say there should be an *outright* alcoholic drinks ban for elders and deacons? 1 Timothy 3:1-13 gives us the answer, especially verses 3 and 8: both elders and deacons must not be *'given to much wine'* (the Greek means *'not addicted'*), this means no alcohol ban, but only drink in moderation (which applies to all Christians!) We can corroborate that there was no alcohol ban for ministers, of course not only because taking communion *required* the taking of a tiny amount of wine, but because Paul clearly tells Timothy the evangelist that he should drink a little wine to help his stomach problems:

*'No longer drink only water, but use a little wine ('oinos': alcoholic wine, my insert) for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities'* (1 Timothy 5:23, NKJV)

#### A Few Occasions When a Christian Should NEVER Drink Alcohol

1. We started this little study with the example of a Christian pastor who drank beer on Sundays. Whilst I think that this man was subsequently very unfairly treated, I must say that I think it unwise for a minister to drink beer on this day. Why? Because beer can be quickly detected on one's breath and, as the apostle Paul shows us, we must consider the conscience of Christians of weaker understanding! As we have seen, from a biblical point of view there is absolutely nothing wrong with drinking a glass of beer, but if somebody in the congregation, of perhaps weaker understanding, sincerely believes that the minister is sinful in drinking beer, that person's conscience is being seriously affected. We must think about these things! For this reason I think it unwise for any church-going Christian to drink beer on a Sunday (I see no harm in a single glass of wine).
2. Christians *SHOULD NOT* drink and drive and several countries (including the UK) have *definite laws* about this which Christians should comply with.
3. If a Christian is mixing with unbelievers and he/she denotes a tendency for them to drink too much, the Christian should take the lead in encouraging moderation. If this fails, the Christian should surely leave any such meeting or gathering.
4. Young people are *always* in danger of over-drinking and it is my considered opinion that Christians should NEVER encourage younger people to drink alcohol.
5. If a Christian has previously had a problem with heavy or addictive drinking he or she should completely avoid it.

#### CONCLUSION

We have plainly seen that the Old Testament portrays wine and strong drink as blessings which God has granted to Mankind, not as a curse. But all of God's blessings can be misused and abused. Good food is a wonderful blessing, but do we say to people, 'It is better not to eat because of the danger of gluttony'? Do we say to young couples on their wedding day, 'It is better not to have sexual relations because sexual lust has ruined many a life'? Do we ever say, 'It is better not to make money because riches and prosperity have destroyed lives'?

For the same reasons, Christians should encourage responsible drinking, rather than tell people that they should not drink at all, this goes way beyond any mandate we have from God. The Bible is continually positive toward the wise use of alcoholic drinks, and we can - and should - be too.

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