

The Wrath of Grapes

Christian Maturity and Alcohol Consumption

"It is good neither to eat flesh, *nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.*" (*Emphasis Mine*, Romans 14:21, NASB)

Many in the pan-evangelical church possess a libertine attitude towards alcohol consumption. I have heard reports that pastors and their elder boards visit local pubs and drink together after administrative meetings. Lately, I've read where numbers of Christian liberal arts universities have lifted their ban on alcohol consumption for faculty and staff with the excuse that prohibition for drinking alcohol in moderation is "biblically indefensible." [1] In another instance upon visiting one blogger's website, and as I scrolled down the section containing his Christian testimony, my eyes fell upon a picture of a large smoking stogie laying across an ashtray near a glass half-full of hard liquor. The picture's message was, it seemed to me, that the blogger, a confessing Christian, saw nothing wrong with either smoking cigars or drinking liquor. Then of late, a movement has arisen among some emerging/emergent Christians called "pub theology." [2] Of course, Christians who might protest drinking alcoholic beverages are labeled with the dreaded "L" word, "Legalist!" But all of this, and more, raises the question, what should be a responsible Christian's attitude toward alcohol consumption, should it be characterized by the other dreaded "L" word, "Libertine"?

To begin with and in a practical way, Wisdom provides the following warning regarding strong drink:

**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. Thine eyes shall behold strange
women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things.** (Proverbs 23:29-33, KJV)

Spiritually, the Apostle Paul warns that "**drunkards**" will not "**inherit the kingdom of God**" (1 Corinthians 6:10; See Galatians 5:21.). Excessive alcohol consumption can get people into trouble with themselves, with others, and with God. Alcoholics can wind up on skid row. Pregnant women who drink alcohol can induce deformity in their babies. Alcoholic parents often abuse their children and bring their families to economic ruin. For these reasons, and more, God is not kindly disposed toward drunkenness or drunkards. Yet, excepting the use of alcohol for health reasons, physical or mental (See 1 Timothy 5:23; Proverbs 30:6.), the moderate

consumption of alcohol is seemingly not addressed in the Bible.

The classic "excuse" passage for moderate/social drinking is when Jesus turned the "water into wine" at the Wedding Feast of Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11). Moderate social drinkers point to the passage and say to Christian prohibitionists, "Gotcha!" Was not the performing of that miracle Jesus' obvious stamp of approval on social drinking? If He made wine for them to drink then, why should we be prohibited from drinking it or other alcoholic beverages now?

To answer this question, some understanding of the relationship of wine to drinking water in New Testament times will be helpful. [3] To purify water for human consumption, two methods were used: boiling the drinking water, or mixing it with alcohol. The first process was obviously inconvenient and time consuming. The second process was convenient and fast. Remember, we like our fast foods. In the New Testament era, folks liked their fast drink! To purify water by mixing it with wine, ancient sources confirm that the ratio of water to wine was various: 3 to 1, 4 to 1, 2 to 1, or 5 to 2. In the mixing of wine and water, the wine became so diluted that it had no impact upon the drinker's sobriety. Such drink would influence the bladders of consumers long before it would affect their brains! What I am saying in this is, when comparing the modern to the ancient world's consumption of alcoholic beverages, we're not comparing apples with apples. The two worlds are worlds apart. The mixed drink of the ancient world was far different than the mixed drinks of ours (like scotch on the rocks, a white wine spritzer or perhaps a Zima).

So then, what should be the Christian believer's attitude toward alcohol consumption? Remember, alcohol can sting you and those around you. Drunk drivers have killed innocent bystanders. Many of us have had alcoholics in our families whose drinking habits have ruined their lives and loved ones around them. A seminary professor once told me that drinking strong drink is like playing Russian roulette (That's where someone loads one chamber in a six gun, spins the chamber, puts the gun to their head, and flirting with death, pulls the trigger.). Based upon the element of chance, my professor said, "You may not lose, but you cannot win." Drinking alcohol is like playing Russian roulette. While you may not lose, you cannot win. The addiction of every alcoholic began with a first drink.

Though no absolute prohibition stance against moderate alcohol consumption drinking can be constructed from the New Testament, that does not mean that it is right, the Lord's changing of water into wine notwithstanding. Social drinking is not a matter of *Christian morality*, but of *Christian maturity*. The Apostle Paul addressed doubtful behavior patterns which if engaged in could hurt immature believers (like spiritually immature students in Christian colleges), alcohol consumption being one of them. He wrote, "**It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles**" (Romans 14:21). Fact of the matter is, mature Christians, wishing to be an example to others, do not drink, while immature Christians, inconsiderate of how their behavior might impact the lives of those around them, do. That's why to Timothy the Apostle wrote that if a man is to be a spiritual leader, he is *not* to be "**addicted to wine**" (i.e., *linger around wine*, 1 Timothy 3:3; See Titus 1:7.). If Paul's statements are brought to bear upon the issue of even moderate alcohol consumption, then it can only be concluded that the faculty and staff of Christian institutions of higher learning--they're supposed to be the leaders, you know--who imbibe *are spiritually immature*. In reference to the cultural norm of alcohol consumption (It's advertised everywhere in our society, from TV commercials to race

cars.), Paul ordered the Ephesians: "**And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit**" (Ephesians 5:18).

This whole business of Christian colleges and universities allowing their faculty and staff to moderately consume alcoholic beverages smacks of pharisaical hypocrisy. As one commented: "If it's Biblically indefensible to deny the drinking to faculty, how come it's still banned for students?" Legitimately, how can any Christian school administration adopt a policy exempting its faculty and staff from a prohibition against alcohol, yet in the very next breath demand abstinence from its students, many of whom are adults? Now, that's legalism! As Jesus told His followers:

"The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them." (Emphasis Mine, Matthew 23:2-3)

So here we have faculty and staff allowed to drink alcohol responsibly and students who are not. Last time I heard, 18-year-olds can still join the military and die for their country, and 21-year-olds (in some states 18-year-olds) can legally purchase alcohol. In the interest of theological consistency, spiritual maturity and Christian testimony, that's why those in positions of Christian leadership ought to refrain from imbibing alcoholic beverages.

ENDNOTES

[1] Kym Reinstadler, "Cornerstone University lifts 68 year ban on staff drinking alcohol, but students still must stay dry," *The Grand Rapids Press*, November 21, 2009. Online at: http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2009/11/cornerstone_university_lifts_6.html. Although the school does allow dancing and has placed any judgment regarding gambling on hold, the president of the university differentiates the continuing prohibition against smoking as opposed the institution's non-prohibition of alcohol consumption for faculty and staff as follows: "Habitual use of tobacco is a major hazard to personal health and the health of others. As such, it undermines our biblical responsibility to be good stewards of the physical body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit." Yet The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services warns: "Difficulty walking, blurred vision, slurred speech, slowed reaction times, impaired memory: Clearly, alcohol affects the brain. *Some of these impairments are detectable after only one or two drinks* and quickly resolve when drinking stops." Are we to arbitrarily think that a cigarette damages the Spirit's temple but a drink does not? See U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, *Alcohol Alert*, "Alcohol's Damaging Effects on the Brain," Publication 63: October 2004. Online at: <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa63/aa63.htm>.

[2] Robert King, "Faith, Hope, Love, Beer," *The Indianapolis Star*, September 27, 2009, A1, A14. Article may be viewed online. See Faith & Values section, Robert King, "Pub Theology conveys Christian message in Broad Ripple," *Indy Star.com*, September 27, 2009, <http://www.indystar.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2009909270384>. Critique of Pub Theology may be viewed at "Emergent Inebriates, Some thoughts on Pub Theology 000," *guardinghisflock.com*, <http://guardinghisflock.com/?p=86#more-86>.

[3] Robert H. Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," *Christianity Today*, June 20, 1975, 9-11.