

Ancient Wisdom and Alcohol Abuse

Introduction:

1. **Proverbs 20:1** "Wine [is] a mocker, strong drink [is] raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise." [cf. Prov. 23:29-32]
2. The drinking of alcoholic beverages by over 100 million Americans is rightly regarded by social analysis as America's number one public enemy. This problem claims at least 100,000 American lives per year, 25 times as many as all illegal drugs combined.
3. The economic cost to the American society of the use of alcohol is estimated by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism at \$117 billion a year. This staggering figure includes the cost of premature deaths, reduced production and special treatments.
4. The real human cost of alcohol, however, transcends any statistical estimate of deaths, disabilities or dollar figures.
 - a. A 1987 Gallup Poll indicated that 1 in 4 families are troubled by alcohol.
 - b. This means that more than 61 million American are affected by some alcohol-related problems such as retarded children, divorce, violence in the home, crime, sickness and death.

#1. A Christian Responsibility

1. Christian churches must bear considerable responsibility for the inestimable human and economic cost of alcohol, because through its teaching, preaching, and example they are able to influence the moral values and practices of society, possibly more than does any other institution.
 - a. For example, in the early part of this century evangelical churches played a major role in influencing the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States on January 16, 1919, outlawing the "manufacture, sale or transportation" of alcoholic beverages.
2. Since the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, however, most churches have abandoned their stand for total abstinence, encouraging "moderation" instead.
 - a. Unfortunately, moderation had led over 18 million Americans to become immoderate drinkers, because alcohol is a habit-forming narcotic which weakens one's capacity for self-control.

3. The moderationists position rests on the belief that Scripture condemns the *immoderate use* of alcohol but approves its *moderate use*.
 - a. This belief is in turn based on the assumption that the Bible knows only fermented wine ("one wine theory") which it considers as a divine blessing to be enjoyed with moderation.
 - b. According to this theory, any condemnation of wine in the Bible refers not to the *kind* of wine, but to the *amount* consumed.

#2. Moral or Medical Issue?

1. By maintaining that the Bible sanctions the moderate use of alcoholic beverages, moderationists have led people to believe that drinking alcohol is not a *moral* but a *medical* issue.
 - a. It is not a transgression of a God-given principle, but a habit which can harm one's health, if abused.
 - b. The elimination of any sinful connotation from the use of alcohol has had an enormous influence on the drinking habits of millions of Christians.
 - c. It has provided Christians with an alleged Biblical and moral justification for drinking alcohol, thus depriving them of a Biblical and moral conviction for abstaining from intoxicating beverages.
2. In view of the immense influence the moderationist view has had on the drinking habits of millions of those who claim to be Christians, I think we should examine some of their fundamental assumptions, namely, that the Bible sanctions a moderate use of alcoholic beverages.
 - a. Since this assumption is dictated by the belief that the terms for "wine" in the Bible always means "fermented wine," we will begin by examining the Biblical and historical usage of such terms.

#3 The Meaning of "Wine"

1. Let's spend a few minutes in survey to ascertain if the terms used for "wine" in the Bible denote exclusively fermented wine or inclusively of either fermented or unfermented wine.
 - a. When one traces the usage of the word "wine" backward, from English, to Latin, Greek and finally to Hebrew one learns that these four related words—

- i. *wine* in English,
 - ii. *vinum* in Latin,
 - iii. *oinos* in Greek
 - iv. and *yayin* in Hebrew—
 - b. -- have been used historically to refer to the juice of the grape, whether fermented or unfermented.
2. If you look at English dictionaries from the 18th century you discover for example:
 - a. From the 1828 Webster's Dictionary under the word *must* we read this definition: "new wine— wine pressed from the grape, but not fermented." Note that unfermented grape juice was explicitly called "new wine."
 - b. **A New English Dictionary** published in 1748 defines "wine" as follows: "1. The juice of the grape. 2. A liquor extracted from other fruits besides the grape. 3. ..." But its noteworthy that here the very first meaning of "wine" is "the juice of the grape."
 3. The English word "wine" comes from the Latin "vinum" where even the spelling and pronunciation are similar.
 - a. It is most clear in the Latin that the word stood for the all kinds of products that came from the grape, the grape juice, the raisins, the various drinks that were made, unfermented and even fermented.
 4. The Greek word for wine was "oinos."
 - a. It can be demonstrated that this word was used in reference to both unfermented grape juice and grape juice which has been fermented.
 5. Earnest Gordon points out that "In the Septuagint, the Hebrew word for grape-juice, *triosh*, is translated at least 33 times by the Greek word *oinos*, wine, and the adjective "new" is not present. *Oinos* without qualification, then, can easily mean unfermented wine in the New Testament."
 6. It is also noteworthy that the Septuagint usually translated the Hebrew *yayin* as *oinos*. Occasionally, as in Job 32:19 *yayin* is rendered as *gleukos*, which is the common Greek word for newly pressed grape juice.
 - a. ["Behold, my heart is like wine [*gleukos* – grape juice] that has no vent; like new wineskins, it is ready to burst."
 7. Equally important to note is that the most frequently used word in the Hebrew, *yayin*, was used of both unfermented and fermented grape juice.
 - a. The Hebrew has several other terms, many more specific, but it is abundantly clear that the Hebrew word *yayin*, the Greek word *oinos*, like the Latin *vinum*, the Old English word *wine* were used as generic terms to refer to either fermented or unfermented grape juice.

- b. Sometimes the Hebrew “*yayin*,” wine, received God’s approval and sometimes His disapproval.
 - i. In some examples where *yayin* obviously means fermented, intoxicating wine it meets with strictest warning from God that it is to be avoided. Prov. 23:29-32 [READ]
 - ii. At some occurrences of the word it obviously means unfermented grape juice.
 - iii. And at some of the instances one has to look to the greater context to decide whether the wine mentioned was intoxicating or un-intoxicating.
- 8. But I want to mention one other Hebrew word *shekar*, that appears, I think 22 times and is rendered “strong drink” in the KJV.
 - a. In our society today we quickly conclude this must have been intoxicating, because it was said, in English, to be “strong” and we think of distilled spirits, which of course they did not even have back at that time.
 - b. But *shekar* is the generic term for the liquid of any fruit other than the grape, such as dates, pomegranates, or palm-wine. And like *yayin* it might be fermented or unfermented, but just the word itself doesn’t reveal it, the context must be examined.
 - c. Frederick R. Lees says, “*Shekar* signifies ‘sweet drink’ expressed from fruits other than the grape, and drunk in an unfermented or fermented state.”
- 9. An investigation into these original Biblical words discredits the claim that the Bible knows only of fermented wine, which it approves when used moderately.
 - a. The truth of the matter is that the Bible knows both fermented wine, which it disapproves, and unfermented grape juice, which it approves.

#4. "Wine" in Biblical Perspective.

- 1. Keep in mind that the word “wine” is used to describe all liquid products of the grape, with no distinction between fermented or unfermented.
 - a. Next one must examine the reasons for Biblical approval of wine in certain passages and a strong disapproval of wine in other passages.
- 2. What is found is that the positive references to "wine" have to do with unfermented and unintoxicating grape juice. Because of its natural and nourishing properties, grape juice was fittingly used to represent—
 - a. the divine blessing of material prosperity (Gen 27:28; 49:10-11; Deut 33:28),
 - b. the blessing of the messianic age (Joel 2:18-19; Jer 31:10-12; Amos 9:13, 14),

- c. it symbolizes God's grace and favor to man (Is 55:1),
 - d. the wholesome joy God offers to His people (Ps 104:14-15; 4:7), and
 - e. the acknowledgment of God through the use of grape juice as offerings and libations (Num 18:12; Deut 14:23; Ex 29:40; Lev 23:13).
3. On the other hand, the negative references to "wine" have to do with fermented and intoxicating wine. Some of the reasons Scripture condemns the use of alcoholic beverages are:
- a. that they distort the perception of reality (Is 28:7; Prov 23:33);
 - b. they impair the capacity to make responsible decisions (Lev 10:9-11);
 - c. they weaken moral sensitivities and inhibitions (Gen 9:21; 19:32; Hab 2:15; Is 5:11-12);
 - d. they cause physical sickness (Prov 23:20-21; Hos 7:5; Is 19:14; Ps 60:3);
 - e. and they disqualify one for both civil and religious service (Prov 31:4-5; Lev 10:9-11; Ezek 44:23; 1 Tim 3:2-3; Titus 1:7-8).

#5. The Preservation of Wine.

1. A major argument contending that Scripture approves the use of fermented grape juice is the allegation that it was not possible in Bible times to preserve grape juice unfermented.
 - a. But again, when one probes this popular assumption by investigating the testimonies of ancient writers regarding the art of preserving fruits and wines in general and grape juice in particular, we find this contention without support.
 - b. Perhaps to your surprise you will discover that the ancients were far more knowledgeable in the art of preserving fruits and juices or wines than is generally believed.
2. Contrary to popular opinion, the problems the ancients encountered in preserving fermented wine were as great as, if not actually greater than, those faced in preserving unfermented grape juice.
 - a. To prevent fermented wine from becoming acid, moldy, or foul-smelling, vintners used a host of preservatives such as salt, sea-water, liquid or solid pitch, boiled-down must, marble dust, lime, sulphur fumes and crushed iris.
3. In comparison to preserving fermented wine, preserving grape juice unfermented was a relatively simple process.
 - a. It was accomplished
 - i. by boiling down the juice to a syrup,
 - ii. or by separating the fermentable pulp from the juice of the grape by means of filtration,

- iii. or by placing the grape juice in sealed jars which were immersed in a pool of cold water,
- iv. or by fumigating the wine jars with sulphur before sealing them.
- b. The use of such techniques clearly indicates that the means of preserving grape juice without allowing it to ferment were known and used considerably in the ancient world.
- c. This conclusion is indirectly supported by the teachings and examples Jesus used when teaching about wine.

#6. Jesus and Wine.

1. The next logical step is for one to examine the major wine-related stories or sayings of Jesus since these are commonly used to prove that Christ 1) *made*, 2) *commended*, 3) *used and even* 4) *commanded* the use of alcoholic wine.
 - a. I just wish we could go into detail to examine these claims. But after a careful study of the gospels— one sees that the contention that Jesus approves of drinking alcoholic beverages in moderation, and did so Himself, is without any textual, contextual and historical support.
2. The "good wine" Jesus *made* at Cana (John 2:10) was "good" not because of its high alcoholic content, but because it was fresh, unfermented grape juice.
 - a. This is indicated by external and internal considerations.
 - i. Externally, contemporary authors, such as Pliny and Plutarch, attest that "good wines" were those which did not intoxicate, having had their alcoholic potency removed.
 - ii. Internally, moral consistency demands that Christ could not have miraculously produced between 120 to 160 gallons of intoxicating wine for the use of men, women and children gathered at the Cana's wedding feast, without becoming morally responsible for prolonging and increasing their intoxication. (John 2:1-11)
 - b. Scriptural and moral consistency requires that "the good wine" produced by Christ was fresh, unfermented grape juice.
 - c. This is supported by the very adjective used to describe it, namely *kalos*, which denotes that which is morally excellent, instead of *agathos*, which means simply good.
3. The "new wine" Jesus *commended* through the parable of the new wineskins (Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37-38) was unfermented must, either boiled or filtered, because not even new wineskins could withstand the pressure of the gas produced by fermenting new wine.
 - a. A frequent misinterpretation of this passage is that "new wine" was put into new

wineskins so that as the juice fermented and produced carbonic acid the new wineskin would expand.

- i. This is incorrect.
- ii. The Encyclopedia Biblica rightly observes that “it is impossible that the *must* could ever have been put into skins to undergo the whole process of fermentation, as is usually stated, the action of the gas given off in the earlier stages of the process being much too violent for any skins to withstand.”
- iii. We know from other historical data that the making of fermented wine was done in vented jars.

b. The reason the “new wine” was put in new wineskins is because previously used wineskins couldn’t be thoroughly cleaned of old wine residue and it would contaminate the new wine and spoil it by causing fermentation. So new wine was put into “new wineskins” so it wouldn’t ferment.

- i. New wine skins were coated inside with honey, and when filled coated outside with a pitch or wax to seal it, and then it was immersed in cold water, or sometimes buried in, what we would call today a cellar for later use.
- ii. Jesus’ comments then is talking about the preservation of unfermented grape juice, and not the making of alcoholic wine.

c. Incidentally– note that Jesus’ miracle at Cana produced wine in water jars, that is, jars that would be clean and not previously used for wine– thus Jesus was enabling the fresh juice of the miracle to be safely kept from starting to ferment til it could be drunk or preserved in some way.

4. The self-description of Jesus as “eating and drinking” (Matt 11:19; **Luke 7:34**) does *not* imply that He *used* alcoholic wine, but rather that He freely associated with people at their meals and elsewhere.

a. The phrase “eating and drinking” was used idiomatically to describe Christ’s social lifestyle.

5. Look at the text of Matt 11:19 and **Luke 7:34**, “Behold a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”

a. This accusation is repeated today saying, “See, Jesus was a drinking man!”

- i. Lovers of alcoholic beverages love to affirm that Jesus was just one of them.
- ii. They believe this passage offers unmistakable proof that Jesus *used* alcoholic wine. While at the wedding of Cana they allege he *made* fermented wine and here, they allege, we see that he himself was a wine bibber.

b. The passage under consideration is contrasting John the Baptist’s life style with that of Jesus. We understand that John was a Nazirite from his mother’s womb– that he abstained from drinking grape juice (Luke 1:15; Num. 6:1-4). Jesus was not a Nazirite.

- i. The argument is pressed then that this shows Jesus drank intoxicating wine and is definitely called a “wine-bibber” (KJV).
 - ii. However as he came “eating and drinking” to show he was socially engaged in contrast to John, he is called a glutton!
 - (1) Was he? Is this charge true.
 - c. In speaking of John– Jesus quotes the enemies as maintaining that “he [John] had a demon”-- was that true? Are we to believe these enemies and their allegations?
 - d. Why then should we believe their allegations that Jesus was a drunk?
 - i. The enemies of the Lord are simply trying to smear John and Jesus in the minds of the people. What they said of them both was not true.
 - ii. Their life style was different – John was socially withdrawn while Jesus associated with those who needed to be saved– but the extreme charges the enemies make are not true.
6. The "fruit of the vine" Christ *commanded* to be used as a memorial of His redeeming blood (Matt 26:28-29; Mark 14:24-25) was not fermented wine, which in the Scripture represents man's sinfulness and divine indignation, but it was unfermented grape juice, which is a fitting emblem of Christ's untainted blood shed for the remission of our sins.
- a. This conclusion is established through a study of
 - i. the language of the Last Supper,
 - ii. the Jewish Passover wine,
 - iii. the Passover law of fermentation,
 - iv. the consistency of the symbol
 - v. and the survival of the practice of using unfermented grape juice at the Lord's Supper.
 - b. Very informative is the fact that Josephus calls the freshly squeezed grape juice "the fruit of the vine."
 - i. This establishes unequivocally that the phrase was used in the first century to designate the sweet, unfermented juice of the grape.
7. The evidence from all the Gospel passages shows that Jesus abstained from all intoxicating substances and gave no sanction to His followers for using them.

#7. Wine in the Apostolic Church.

- 1. The way the first century church understood, preached and practiced the teachings of Jesus and of the Old Testament regarding the use of alcoholic beverages provides valuable verification and clarification as to whether Scripture teaches moderation or abstinence.

- a. In light of the fundamental importance of the teaching and practice of the first century church, one ought to examine the apostolic teachings regarding the use of wine in particular and of intoxicating substances in general.
2. Such an investigation will prove to be the most rewarding. For contrary to the prevailing perception today, you will find that the New Testament is amazingly consistent in its teaching of abstinence from the use of alcoholic beverages.
 - a. The very passages often used to support the moderationist view, under close scrutiny are found to negate such a view, teaching abstinence instead.
3. For example, the irony of the mockers' charge that on the day of Pentecost the apostles were drunk on *gleukos*, that is, on the grape juice which was their common beverage (Acts 2:13), provides an indirect but important proof that the life-style of the apostles was one of total abstinence and that they followed the example of their Master.
 - a. There would have been no point in the mockers' attributing to unfermented grape juice the cause of the disciples' strange actions, if it was not common knowledge that the apostles abstained from intoxicating wine.
 - b. The intended jibe was that the disciples were such naïve simpletons they got drunk on grape juice!
4. Similarly, Paul's reference to drunkenness at the communion table of the Corinthian church (1 Cor 11:21) offers no support for a moderate use of alcoholic wine, for two reasons.
 - a. First, whatever was done at Corinth was a departure from the instructions Paul had delivered to the church (1 Cor 11:23);
 - i. thus, the Corinthians' conduct constitutes a warning rather than an example for us.
 - b. Second, a study of the meaning of the verb *methuo* ("satiated") and of the implications of Paul's admonitions, clearly suggests that the problem at Corinth was indulgence in eating rather than intoxication with alcoholic wine.
5. One will find one of the most powerful Biblical indictments against intoxicating wine in Ephesians 5:18, where Paul condemns wine as the cause of debauchery and shows the irreconcilable contrast between the spirit of wine and the Holy Spirit of God.
 - a. To great surprise, however, one finds that most English translations and commentaries have chosen to translate or interpret Ephesians 5:18 by making "drunkenness" rather than "wine" the cause of debauchery.
 - b. It is interesting to see how the change of view in our society has affect modern translations.

- c. Older translations, English and foreign languages as well, all translated Paul's text as saying that in the very nature of the wine under discussion is debauchery.
- d. It seems that many modern translators have such a predilection for wine that some decided, to borrow the words of Ernest Gordon, to "save the face of wine while condemning drunkenness."⁶

6. Another prime example of how even translators are caught up in the pressure of society is evident in the study of the apostolic admonitions of abstinence, as expressed through the verb *nepho* and the adjective *nephalios*.

- a. The very first meaning of the verb is "to abstain from wine" and of the adjective "abstinent, without wine."
- b. Yet these words, in modern translations, have been consistently translated with their secondary sense of being "temperate, sober, steady," rather than by their primary meaning of being "abstinent."
- c. Undoubtedly, such translations have misled many sincere Christians into believing that the Bible teaches moderation in the use of alcoholic beverages, rather than total abstinence from them.

See Vine on word "sober" verb *nepho*; and adjective *nephalios*.

The first meaning is "signifies to be free from the influences of intoxicants."

See: 1 Thess. 5:6, 8; 2 Tim. 4:5; 1 Pet 1:13; 4:7; And adj. 1Tim. 3:11; Tit. 2:2. Just as the denominational world sold out on the Greek work "baptidzo", today we in the church are on the verge of selling out on the Greek word "temperate" and "sober" to accept secondary meanings of those word.

- 7. It is equally surprising to discover that the fundamental reason given by Peter and Paul for their call to a life of mental vigilance and physical abstinence is eschatological, namely, preparing one to live in the holy presence of Christ at coming.
 - a. To abstain from intoxicating substances represents a tangible response to God's invitation to make concrete preparation for the return of Christ.

#8 Some Misunderstood Passages.

- 1. To be fair to those who find support for their moderationist position in certain Biblical passages, one needs to do an extensive analysis of those passages.
 - a. The study of each text
 - i. and in the light of its immediate and larger context,

- ii. the historical customs of the time
 - iii. and the overall teaching of Scripture,
 - b. -- will show that none of them contradict the Biblical command for abstinence. On the contrary, some of them indirectly but conclusively support abstinence.
2. Proverbs 31:6, for example, suggests in an ironical fashion that alcoholic beverages are only suited for killing the excruciating pain of someone who is dying.
3. Similarly, Hosea 4:11 provides no justification for a moderate use of alcoholic beverages for two reasons.
- a. First, because "wine and new wine" are mentioned figuratively, as representative of those things which they had used for idolatrous purposes.
 - b. Second, the "wine and new wine" are condemned in the text for taking away understanding.
4. In a different yet equally convincing way, 1 Timothy 5:23 supports the principle of abstinence in two significant ways.
- a. First, the advice, "No longer drink *only* water," implies that Timothy, like the priests and Nazirites, had abstained until that time from all wines, both fermented and unfermented, perhaps, as some think, even in accordance with the example of Paul. [I don't know that this could be demonstrated about Paul.]
 - b. Second, the apostle recommended to Timothy to use only a *little* wine, not for the physical pleasure of the belly, but for the medical need of the stomach.
 - c. Now what is assumed by many today is that the wine Paul recommends is alcoholic.
 - i. So much of our medicine today contains alcohol because it is a good solvent of medical ingredients.
 - ii. But we must be careful or we impose the views of our present society, with regard to medicine and alcohol, back upon the first century.
 - d. Ancient writers such as Aristotle, Athanaeus, and Pliny indicate that unfermented wine was known and preferred to alcoholic wine for medical purposes, because it did not have the side effects of the latter.
 - e. In the light of these testimonies and of the other Biblical teachings regarding wine, it is reasonable then to assume that the wine recommended by Paul for medical use was unfermented grape juice.

CONCLUSION:

1. The conclusion of this study on the Biblical teaching regarding the use of alcoholic beverages can be summarized in one sentence:
 - a. Scripture is consistent...
 - i. -- in teaching moderation in the use of wholesome, unfermented beverages
 - ii. -- and abstinence from the use of intoxicating fermented beverages.
 - b. Friends, total abstinence is a principle clearly taught in the Scripture by warnings and by examples.
 - c. Disregard for this principle represents a violation of the law of God.
 - i. Obedience to this principle will bring blessings to the Christian and to his family by eliminating one of the most destructive and damning instruments of the Devil in our society today.
2. One could discuss at great length on the harmful effects of the use of alcoholic beverages upon the individual, the home and society at large.
 - a. The ill effects upon the drinker are mental, moral, physical and spiritual.
 - b. As for the home, the use of alcoholic beverages often deprives families of their basic necessities, and fosters violence and the abuse of children and spouses.
 - c. With reference to society, we find alcohol consumption to be an incentive to crime, a major cause of accidents and of public-health problems.

Alcohol in America.

1. To help us appreciate from a social and medical perspective why the Bible condemns the use of alcoholic beverages, we need only look to the social and medical consequences of alcohol consumption in American society.
 - a. Statistics indicate that the cost of alcohol use to the American people is appallingly high, not only in economic terms (\$117 billion per year), but also in terms of human pain, misery, violence, child and spouse abuse, divorces, crime, sickness and death.
 - b. It is inconceivable to think that at least 100,000 human lives are lost every year in America alone because of alcohol-related problems.
2. If America wants to deal effectively with the tragedy of alcohol, it must develop an entirely new cultural attitude toward alcohol and aggressively promote abstinence.
 - a. Christians can play a vital role in this endeavor, if we will return to the Biblical imperative for abstinence.
 - b. It is only when Christians recognize and accept the fact that drinking alcoholic beverages

is not only physically harmful, but also Biblically and morally wrong, that they are likely to feel compelled, not only to abstain from intoxicating substances themselves, but also to help others do likewise.

END NOTES

1. The phrase "beloved enemy" is used by Jack Van Impe repeatedly in his book, *Alcohol: The Beloved Enemy* (Royal Oak, Michigan, 1980).
2. The figures are provided by the 1986 report of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, as quoted in "Coming to Grips with Alcoholism," *U.S. News & World Report* (November 30, 1987):56.
3. Ernest Gordon, *Christ, the Apostles and Wine* (Philadelphia, 1947), p. 31.

Recommended Books:

W.D. Jeffcoat, The Bible and "Social" Drinking, c. 1987, W.D. Jeffcoat, 5925 Hwy 128, Savannah, TN 38372-6038

William Patton, Bible Wines "Laws of Fermentation and Wines of The Ancients", 1871, (Various Publishers since the copyright has expired.)

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