

# Drinking and the Bible

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There are some topics in the spiritual realm that are going to be controversial until the Lord comes back, and one of those topics is drinking. Even though drunkenness is a problem in the church, there isn't really much controversy about it. After all, we can turn to half a dozen passages that say drunkenness is a sin. However, once we begin to consider the drinking of alcohol that stops short of drunkenness, the truth becomes much murkier.

In part, this is because of the way that the Scripture and brethren in times past have addressed the issue. Let me be clear about this: there is no passage in the Bible that out-and-out says that it is wrong to drink alcohol even if we don't get drunk. If there were such a passage, this sermon would be a lot shorter! In response to this vacuum, many Christians have advanced arguments against so-called social drinking that are quite frankly bad. I can remember sitting in the pew as a teenager, hearing some sermons directed against drinking, and thinking, "Now those are some dumb arguments!"

In addition, there are tremendous pressures on the Christian to drink. Now that it's college football season again, I spend my Saturday afternoons glued to the TV, and in that time, I see quite literally dozens of commercials for various kinds of beer. These commercials put drinking in the best light possible, where all the drinkers are young and beautiful and surrounded by friends and having a great time. This positive perspective on alcohol is deeply ingrained in our culture. From high school through law school, I was surrounded by drinkers who urged me to drink with them.

So then, what are we to do? Should we just drift on the tide of popular opinion and drink as the world does? That may be the easy answer, but it's not necessarily the right answer. Instead, we need to return to the word. Even in disputed areas like this, we can still use it to uncover the truth. Let's look, then, at drinking and the Bible.

## How Scripture Speaks.

Before we go any further, though, we need to consider the two ways that Scripture speaks to us. One of those ways is through black-letter commandments about our thoughts and actions. For instance, the Bible commands me not to steal. It does so in plain language with a meaning that cannot be mistaken. I might not like it, but there is really no logical way for me to dispute that I can't be a thief. Sadly, there is no clear commandment like this about social drinking.

At other times, though, the word lays out broad Scriptural principles that require us to use our own wisdom to make application. This is what Paul is getting at in Ephesians 5:15-17. We are to use the combination of the Bible and our wisdom to understand what the will of God is. This is inevitable. After all, if God had given us a Bible that spelled everything out, it would be the size of a law library. Instead of doing that, God treats us like grownups. He gives us enough information to work with, and then trusts us to use that information honestly to reach the right decision.

## Arguments Against Drinking.

When we study Scripture in this way, it reveals to us four main arguments against drinking. The first of these is that **DRINKING LESSENS SELF-CONTROL**. Peter emphasizes the importance of self-control in 2 Peter 1:5-8. Self-control is one of the core values of Christianity. It is something that we must possess and constantly improve on if we wish to be fruitful in the kingdom, and without it, we will never lay hold of the reward of heaven.

Sadly, when we drink, it has the effect of undermining this critical spiritual attribute. Drinking alcohol lowers our inhibitions, which inevitably makes us less self-controlled. Although this loss of self-control is most obvious when the drinker has become fully drunk, it begins just as soon as the first drink is downed. At that point, we still have some control of ourselves, but we don't have all the control we have when we're completely sober. As a result, that dark, nasty, evil side that all of us have, that we normally keep chained up, is let out to play just a little bit. We might not hit our wives in classic drunken wife-beater fashion, but we might say something ungodly to them that we wouldn't otherwise have said. We might not sleep with that good-looking co-worker at the office Christmas party, but we might flirt a little bit. In short, we forfeit some of that self-control we have worked so hard to build, and that's what makes drinking dangerous.

Second, **DRINKING PUTS US IN BAD SITUATIONS**. Peter defines some of these situations in 1 Peter 4:3. Here, he describes a corrupt, debauched way of life that was common 2000 years ago and is still common today. There are millions in this country who spend their weekends in the same sort of filthiness that Peter depicts. As children of God, that life isn't for us anymore, and part of that life is what the text calls "drinking parties," social gatherings that are held at least partially for the purpose of consuming alcohol. Let's be honest about this, brethren. When we go to a party like that, even if we don't get all the way drunk, even if we don't drink at all, for that matter, what are we living for? Are we living for the will of God? Are we sharing in the sufferings of Christ? Or are we following along with the lusts of men? Is that a situation where our light is shining, or are we hiding that light beneath a veil of worldliness? A foolish friend of mine once insisted to me that it was good for him to go to drinking parties, because when he and his friends got

wasted, they had the best conversations about God, and it was a way for him to reach out to them. Thankfully, my friend got his life straightened out, but I never saw him lead a single one of his drinking buddies to the Lord. That's the kind of environment that is associated with drinking, and it's not the environment that we need to be associated with.

Third, **DRINKING LEADS TO DRUNKENNESS.** To pick just one of the passages that condemns the latter, look at Ephesians 5:18-19. There's no way we can condone drunkenness and still claim to be honest students of the word, and there is no bright-line distinction between drunk and drinking-but-not-drunk. The Bible doesn't define drunkenness as having a .08 blood alcohol content, and most people don't carry breathalyzers around with them anyway. Instead, the process of becoming drunk is a hazy one, with each additional drink having an effect that is difficult to gauge precisely. We don't come equipped with a warning light that tells us when we're a drink away from having one too many.

This haziness and confusion is only intensified by the mind-clouding effects of alcohol itself. If any of us were forced to walk a tightrope, there's not a one of us that would want a drink beforehand. We would want all of our reflexes and all of our wits about us. When we drink, we're walking a spiritual tightrope. We're engaging in an activity that could easily plunge us into sin if we aren't careful. And yet, at a moment when we need to be most discerning, intoxication is eroding our discernment. Is it any wonder that so many social drinkers eventually end up going over the edge? In my whole life, I've met one person who drank and never became drunk. Those aren't good odds, friends. Is it truly wise for us to engage in an activity that has such a high risk of sin? Do we really need to give the devil that kind of opportunity? In this day and age, there is nothing so valuable about drinking that it should lead us to endanger our souls like that.

Finally, **DRINKING LEADS OTHERS TO SIN.** Paul explores this notion in Romans 14:20-21. Even if we are convinced within ourselves that it's fine for us to drink, this is a classic Romans 14 situation. There are many, many people in the church who are convinced that it would be wrong for them to take even a single drink. Some of those brethren are very strong-willed and sure of themselves, but others are not. If one of those uncertain brethren sees me drinking and is encouraged by my example to drink and violate his own conscience, then he is sinning, and his sin is charged to my account as well. Paul says it would be better never to drink again than to run a risk like that. If we are truly concerned about our brethren, we will make sure that nothing about our conduct will endanger their souls.

When we put all of these things together, the truth becomes plain. No, there is nothing in Scripture that straight-up prohibits a Christian from taking a single drink. However, once we take that drink, we expose ourselves and others to a multitude of spiritual dangers. Drinking is simply not the right decision for a disciple to make.

### Counterarguments.

In response to the case against social drinking, there are several counterarguments that brethren who enjoy drinking like to make. The first is that the Bible endorses **MEDICINAL DRINKING**, so all drinking must be OK. We see this famous endorsement made in 1 Timothy 5:23. However, to truly understand Paul's meaning, we need to consider the context in which this was written. First of all, there's a reason why Paul tells Timothy to drink for his stomach's sake. In this nation at this time, we are blessed with clean water. None of us worry that if we drink out of a tap, it will make us sick. 2000 years ago, that was emphatically not true. Human beings in the time of Christ didn't have the first clue about germ theory, so anybody who lived in a city ran the risk of picking up anything from dysentery to cholera from drinking dirty water. It sure sounds like Timothy, with his habit of drinking only water, had picked up that kind of bug.

As we've already discussed, there are a lot of problems with alcohol, but one of the big benefits of alcohol is that it's sterile. It's created through the process of fermentation, in which various yeasts consume the grape juice or whatever and replace it with their own excrement, and the excrement is the alcohol. Once the alcohol content gets high enough, all the yeasts basically drown in their own wastes, and no other germs can live there either. That means that if Timothy started drinking even a little wine with his water, the wine would act as a primitive water-purification tablet, kill off all the germs, and give Timothy's poor tortured intestines some peace. That's why Paul said what he did.

Today in our situation, the same logic doesn't apply to us. If we're somewhere where we can't trust the local water supply and bottled drinks from elsewhere aren't available, then yes, it might be wise to take a little wine for our stomachs' sake. However, in modern-day Chicago, the argument just doesn't fly. We have germ-free drinks already, and the health benefits of wine that wineries love to tout are outweighed by the health risks associated with drinking.

The second favorite counterargument is that **JESUS TURNED WATER INTO WINE.** This story is found in John 2:7-10. From this, the argument goes that if Jesus created alcoholic beverages, then it must be OK for His disciples to drink them. The problem with the argument is that it ignores the imprecision of the Greek language. Because they didn't have access to refrigeration or preservation methods, grape juice was just not a common commodity 2000 years ago. Both fermented and unfermented grape juice are described by the same word, the Greek word *oinos*. Normally, we can tell from context whether the Scripture is describing grape juice or wine, but John 2 is one place where we can't. When the text says that Jesus turned water into *oinos*, there's absolutely no way to tell what He made. It could have been wine, or it could have been really yummy grape juice. As a result, we can't draw any moral conclusions from the miracle.