

Alcohol

Written by Steve Mayo

The Issue:

Alcohol is a very public issue. Every week we hear of the negative effects of alcohol abuse – for example, **A Current Affair** ran a story about the foolish behaviour of drunks at the Melbourne Cup. There they were, young adults dressed in their finest stumbling around, talking rudely and vomiting in the bushes.

We are also familiar with the statistics. We've heard that:

74% of teenagers

90% of young adults

82% of the total Australian population drink alcohol as a social beverage.

This doesn't surprise us, because we see it. Having a beer on a Friday is an end-of-work-week ritual – as is a beer with sport, or at a party, or a glass of wine or two with a nice meal.

Half of all alcohol consumed in Australia is in the form of beer. The rate of beer consumption, somewhat surprisingly, has not increased in the last 20 years – in fact, it has decreased slightly. Wine is the growth industry – 400% since 1964.

In spite of constant appeals in the media to drink responsibly, young people are taking greater risks today with alcohol than in previous generations. Of girls aged between 14 and 17, 9% consume enough alcohol in a week to be at high risk of permanent health damage. Binge drinking (7+ standard drinks for a male; 5+ for a female) has risen to alarming levels: 10% of teenagers binge drink every week.

These teenagers – and the even higher percentage that binge drink occasionally – put themselves at serious risk. Alcohol is a neurotoxin – it poisons the brain. Consuming alcohol while the brain is still developing in adolescence can cause damage to the frontal lobe and other parts of the brain. This leads to learning and memory losses, lack of motivation, and a loss of control over impulses.

But what about the country as a whole? How much alcohol is consumed at risky levels? A staggering 59%. The simple fact is this: most alcohol is not consumed responsibly.

We see the results:

3000+ deaths annually

65 000+ hospital admissions annually

In a news report, St Vincents Hospital in Sydney stated that 80% of their weekend admissions are alcohol-related.

I could go on with additional statistics – but you have heard these before. You understand that alcohol is a drug; that it is addictive; and that it causes great harm.

But, to many people, it is also enjoyable.

The Debate:

Can a Christian drink alcohol?

Some Christians would say, “All those statistics you've given are a worst-case scenario. Is there really any harm in an occasional drink?”

Is it a sin to drink alcohol?

The Solution:

There are over 200 references in the Bible to wine and/or alcohol. A survey of what the Bible has to say leads to three conclusions:

1. Drunkenness is forbidden

Prov 23:20-21

20 Do not mix with winebibbers, or with gluttonous eaters of meat;

21 For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and drowsiness will clothe a man with rags. (NKJ)

1 Cor 5:11

11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner-- not even to eat with such a person. (NKJ)

What is drunkenness? The RTA defines it as .05 blood alcohol level for regular drivers and .02 for professional drivers. How many drinks does it take to reach .05? As little as two beers depending on your gender and size. For L and P platers, the law states zero alcohol. This means that the RTA recognises that it only takes one drink to cause impairment.

The Bible tells us plainly that it is a sin to get drunk.

2. Strong drink is forbidden

7941 shekar (shay-kawr');

from 7937; an intoxicant, i.e. intensely alcoholic liquor: (undiluted beverage)

Isa 5:11

11 Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may follow intoxicating drink; who continue until night, till wine inflames them! (NKJ)

Can a Christian drink strong drink? The answer is “no”. Why? Because hard liquor is consumed for one reason – the effect of the alcohol. It certainly isn't for the taste!

3. Wine is not expressly forbidden (I am not saying that it is permitted – the Bible does not explicitly condone the drinking of wine either)

This is where the issue gets a bit clouded for some people. To sort out the answer to whether or not a Christian can drink wine (and beer), we need to do three things:

1. A Lexical analysis – this means, we need to accurately define the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated “wine”. Do these words mean exactly

the same thing as the word “wine” means to us? Or is something lost in the translation?

2. A Syntactical analysis – this means, we need to observe how wine is spoken of in the Bible. Is it positive, negative or neutral? Or a combination?
3. A Historical analysis – this means, we need to understand what wine was in the era in which the Bible was written. Was it the same as today? Or was it different?

Firstly, let's consider the words. Some preachers have argued that the Bible word for wine actually means grape juice – and, therefore, the mention of wine in the Bible should never be mistaken for an alcoholic beverage. I have taught this conclusion myself. However, a closer examination of the Scripture has caused me to see that we can't always be so dogmatic about this.

There are two Hebrew words translated “wine”: *yayin*, which can refer to anything produced from grapes, including alcoholic wine, and *tirosh*, which is new juice from the vine, and, therefore, not intoxicating.

W E Vine, a noted scholar in biblical languages, explains:

Yayin [sometimes] represents an intoxicating beverage. This is evident in its first biblical appearance: "And Noah began to be a husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: and he drank of the wine, and was drunken..." <Gen. 9:20-21>. The word is used as a synonym of tirosh. Tirosh is distinguished from yayin by referring only to new wine not fully fermented; yayin includes "wine" at any stage. (from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright (C) 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

In the New Testament, there are two Greek words translated “wine”. As in the Old Testament, one term can refer to both alcoholic and nonalcoholic beverages, and the other is “new” -- nonalcoholic.

1. *oinos* ^{^3631^} is the general word for "wine." The mention of the bursting of the wineskins, <Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37>, implies fermentation. See also <Eph. 5:18> (cf. <John 2:10; 1 Tim. 3:8; Titus 2:3>). In <Matt. 27:34>, the RV has "wine".

2. *gleukos* ^{^1098^} denotes sweet "new wine," or must, <Acts 2:13>, where the accusation shows that it was intoxicant and must have been undergoing fermentation some time.

Note: In instituting the Lord's Supper He speaks of the contents of the cup as the "fruit of the vine." So <Mark 14:25>. (from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright (C) 1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers)

The lexical analysis, therefore, is not conclusive. So we look at the syntactical, or the grammatical/contextual analysis. How is wine spoken about in the Bible? Good? Bad? Neutral?

>Drinking wine was clearly prohibited for some people:

Kings

Prov 31:4-5

4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, nor for princes intoxicating drink;
5 Lest they drink and forget the law, and pervert the justice of all the afflicted. (NKJ)

Priests

Lev 10:9-10

9 "Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations,
10 "that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean, (NKJ)

Nazirites

Num 6:2-3

2 "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; (NKJ)

Why were these forbidden from drinking wine? Because they were in leadership and were spiritual role models for the community.

>Other people appear to have drunk wine without judgement

Deut 14:26

26 "And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household. (NKJ)

Does this mean that moderate amounts of wine and beer are okay?

Not necessarily.

1. Although Deuteronomy 14.26 appears to have condoned the purchase of wine, a subsequent verse shows that the people abstained, and were commended:

Deut 29:6

6 "you have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or similar drink; that you may know that I am the LORD your God. (NKJ)

2. As we've already noted, it must always be remembered that the word translated "wine" in the Bible is actually a general term that includes not only the alcoholic form of a beverage made from grapes, but also nonalcoholic forms such as juice and jams. Consequently, when we see a somewhat positive reference to *yayin* or *oinos*, is it grape juice or alcoholic wine? When we see a negative reference – the same question applies.

And so we come to the Historical analysis. This analysis is more conclusive than the previous two. Here we discover that the wine in the Bible – even the kind that contained alcohol – was not the same as the wine we have today. How is that?

1. It was mixed with water – 3 or 4 parts to 1. In other words, it was used in the same way that we use cordial. Now, imagine that you have alcoholic wine. How potent would it be if you added four parts water?

The June 20, 1975, issue of *Christianity Today* contained an interesting article by Robert H. Stein: "Wine-Drinking In New Testament Times." He observes that the wine used in ancient times was mixed with water in ratios of up to four parts water to one part wine. Mr. Stein explains:

In the Talmud, which contains the oral traditions of Judaism from about 200 BC to AD 200, there are several tractates in which the mixture of water and wine is discussed. One tractate (Shabbath 77a) states that wine that does not carry three parts water is not wine. The normal mixture is said to consist of two parts water to one part wine. In a most important reference (Pesachim 108b) it is stated that the four cups every Jew was to drink during the Passover ritual were to be mixed in a ratio of three parts water to one part wine. From this we can conclude with a fair degree of certainty that the fruit of the vine used at the institution of the Lord's Supper was a mixture of three parts water to one part wine. In another Jewish reference from around 60 BC, we read, "It is harmful to drink wine alone, or again, to drink water alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances one's enjoyment" (II Maccabees 15:39).

Therefore, our present day beer and wine would be classified as **strong drink** by biblical standards. Remember, with strong drink the answer is clear – it is forbidden.

Here is the advice of Scripture:

Prov 23:31-35

31 Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly;

32 At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper.

33 Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart will utter perverse things.

34 Yes, you will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying:

35 "They have struck me, but I was not hurt; they have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?" (NKJ)

Can a Christian drink? It seems that the answer would be maybe.

But have we really been asking the right question? I don't think so. It is not a matter of CAN a Christian drink (as in "how close to the world can I get without offending God"), it is a matter of SHOULD a Christian drink (as in "what is the wisest choice")?

In other words, when we ask, "CAN I do something", we are looking for a licence to do what I want to do. But when we ask "SHOULD I do something", we are looking for a liberty to do the best thing.

On the question of "should", the Bible is quite clear in what it says.

The Debate:

Should a Christian drink alcohol?

The Solution:

No, a Christian should not drink:

1. Because Christians live in the realm of the Spirit, not the flesh.

Why drink beer or wine?

>Quench thirst?

>Taste?

>Acceptance?

>Effects?

1 Pet 4:1-5

1 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,

2 that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

3 For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles-- when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.

4 In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.

5 They will give an account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (NKJ)

³ You have had enough in the past of the evil things that godless people enjoy—their immorality and lust, their feasting and drunkenness and wild parties, and their terrible worship of idols.

⁴ Of course, your former friends are very surprised when you no longer join them in the wicked things they do, and they say evil things about you. ⁵ But just remember that they will have to face God, who will judge everyone, both the living and the dead. *Holy Bible : New Living Translation. 1997 (1 Pe 4:3). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House.*

Note also Ephesians 5.18

Eph 5:18

18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, (NKJ)

The point is this: As a Christian, you should be different. Your motivation in life is spiritual, not fleshly. Alcohol is a pleasure of the flesh. It also is a drug that intoxicates and addicts – it controls. A Christian must never be controlled by anything or anyone other than the Holy Spirit.

2. Because Christians love others more than themselves.

Rom 14:21

21 It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. (NKJ)

Is it possible that a fellow believer near to you struggles with alcohol – perhaps as a recovering alcoholic, or as the victim of alcohol abuse? We know that alcohol is a matter of offence to some. Will we demonstrate our love by placing our brother's interests ahead of our own?

3. Because Christians must never risk jeopardising their good reputation.

1 Tim 3:2-3

2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach;

3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; (NKJ)

How many people do things after drinking that they later regret? Do you think Mel Gibson wishes he had not had anything to drink on the night he made antisemitic remarks to a police officer?

It is not worth the risk. This is why we've seen that the Bible specifically does not permit kings, priests, pastors and Nazirites to drink. By extension, this would apply to every believer – because every believer is a priest (see 1 Peter 2.5,9)

4. Because Christians must be sober for the times are evil.

1Thes 5:6-8

6 Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.

7 For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night.

8 But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. (NKJ)

It is clear, therefore, that it is wise for a Christian not to drink.