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Should Today's Christian drink alcohol?



Controversy very often surrounds the issue of the Christian and alcohol.

Part of the reason for this is that the Bible does not pronounce clearly on the matter of abstinence. It is often alleged that a stand against Christians drinking alcoholic beverage is unscriptural and is an improper binding of the conscience of others. While it is a fundamental principle of Biblical Protestantism that each

individual has a right to act in agreement with his own conscience before God and in the light of written revelation, it should always be remembered that conscience is not an infallible guide. Our conscience about a given issue is not to act independently of Scripture but is to be shaped by the teaching of the Word of God, whether that teaching is clearly stated or implied. While there is no express command in Scripture prohibiting the consumption of alcohol there are other Scriptural principles which can be applied to the case of the Christian's use of alcohol. The Biblical principles of personal separation from the world: *Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this...to keep himself unspotted from the world* (James 1:27); and the maintenance of a good testimony before men: *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven* (Matthew 5:16) go a long way in making a firm case for a Christian abstaining from all non-medicinal use of alcohol.

There may be some aspects of this issue that are not clear at first but there is no doubt whatever that the Scripture condemns drunkenness in the plainest possible terms. There are numerous clear statements in Scripture!

1. Rom 13:13 *Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness*. Drunkenness is the mark of those who are in the darkness of spiritual night, it is the mark v14 of those who have not put on the Lord Jesus and who fulfil the lusts of the flesh.

2. I Corinthians 5:11 *But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat*. Again Paul is writing to believers and is urging separation from one who commits, among other sins, the sin of drunkenness. He terms such a one a *wicked person* v13.

3. I Corinthians 6:9-10 *Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God*. Here the seriousness of the sin of drunkenness is obvious for it is the mark of those who are on their way to Hell. No drunkard will be in Heaven!

4. Gal 5:19-21 *Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such*



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things shall not inherit the kingdom of God . Drunkenness is a mark of carnality. Paul is arguing in the context that the flesh and the Spirit are contrary. Those who live practising indulgence of the lusts of the flesh - one of which is drunkenness - will never see Heaven.

5. Ephesians 5:18 *be not drunk with wine* . An unmistakable command!

In Scripture drunkenness is presented as an evil that leads to yet more sin--Genesis 9:21. Here is the first reference in Scripture to the consumption of wine. It leads to drunkenness. The offender here is Noah the man of God! His sin leads on to other sin of a most serious nature for his son engages sodomite practice against him. As a further consequence the curse of God comes upon Canaan, Ham's son. Noah's drunkenness has a large part to play in the curse of God coming on his offspring!

It is one of the marks of apostasy in the nation and of moral and spiritual decline when drunkenness increases. Isaiah 28:7 records *But they also have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way; the priest and the prophet have erred through strong drink, they are swallowed up of wine, they are out of the way through strong drink; they err in vision, they stumble in judgment* .

Drunkenness is seen as the cause of much misery: Proverbs 23:29-35 *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. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not: when shall I awake? I will seek it yet again* .

Drunkenness is a sin upon which God has pronounced His woe! *Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!* (Isaiah 5:11).

In the light of the serious nature of this sin, and the solemn things God has said about those who engage in it, no Christian should have any desire to even come close to committing it. Yet it is a sad feature of many Christians that they want to be the Lord's and yet walk as close to the world as possible. It is precisely this kind of mentality that motivates many to drink alcohol so long as they can avoid drunkenness.

All that has been said so far relates to the abuse of alcohol and the question still remains, Should Christians drink alcohol at all? or does the Scripture merely forbid its abuse? The words of Paul to Timothy, *Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities* (I Timothy 5:23) are often wrongly used as an argument in defence of the Christian's right to drink alcohol in moderation.

Paul advocates the use of wine/alcohol on medical grounds. Wine was used as a medicine in Biblical times. Luke 10:34 records that the Good Samaritan in the parable used *oil and*



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wine as medications for the wounded victim of the thieves; Proverbs 31:6 states *Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish* ; Mark 15:23 records wine being offered to Christ as He is about to be crucified. Even in this medical context Paul speaks only of *a little wine* . It is clear from these words that what Paul is speaking of is the addition of a little wine to the water Timothy is drinking in order to make it safe to drink. The water supply in the Middle East and especially in Bible times was far from healthy. *Infirmities* ! sicknesses ! were the regular consequence of drinking water unsterilised by *a little wine* . This point will also nullify the objection that is often raised that the Lord Jesus, His disciples and all the people of God since the beginning of time drank wine. The grounds Paul uses here as a reason for Timothy using wine can hardly be said to prevail today! We are blessed with the provision of water that is not a threat to health. Paul's direction to Timothy does not give any believer license to drink wine as a beverage. He does *not* advocate drinking wine instead of water. It is of note that he speaks of "drinking" water but of "using" the wine. At most his words permit the medicinal use of alcohol.

It is of the utmost importance to see in this verse that Timothy had been in the practice of abstaining from even from *a little wine* despite the fact that his stance on this issue caused him personal hurt. He had *often* suffered *infirmities* rather than drink wine in even its most dilute form! His self-denial in this matter is remarkable. It is to one who is in the habit of denying the appetites of the body that Paul gives this counsel.

Timothy's example of abstinence from alcohol is complemented by others in Scripture ! John the Baptist Luke 1:15, the Rechabites Jer 35:5-6, 13-14, 18-19. The idea of abstinence from wine as an aspect of service for God is seen in the command to the Priests in Lev 10:9 *Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die* ; and in the service of the Nazarite " *He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried* (Numbers 6:3). Any abstinence from wine must be done out of love for the Lord and as service for Him if it is to be spiritually profitable. Any other motive will tend only to the bondage of Phariseism!

Let us always remember that at the heart of this question lies the issue of the appetites of the flesh and how far they should be indulged. Often there is a thin dividing line between necessary use of something and carnal indulgence in it. It is easy to progress from one to the other! One important question to be asked in this context is, **Is it more important to be able to indulge a taste for wine than it is to be a good witness for Christ and to avoid being a stumbling block to others?**

We should always be ready to deny ourselves, even something that may be perfectly legitimate and justifiable, if it will stand in the way of witness for Christ or will be a hindrance to ourselves or others. Scripture teaches this very clearly " *Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way....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* (Romans 14:13, 21). In Scripture *brother* refers not only to our own flesh and blood but also to our fellow human



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beings, the members of Adam's family. We should never act in such a way as to cause ourselves or another believer to fall or be hindered in their walk with Christ, nor should we be a stumbling block in the sinner's path to the Saviour.

It should also be remembered that any carnal appetite that is indulged can grow to exercise destructive effects. An appetite that is restrained and controlled today but is fed and indulged can be uncontrollable tomorrow. None should ever forget that the harvest of indulging the flesh is very often reaped in our children. David reaped the consequence of his sin with Bathsheba in their son and in Absalom. A father may well be able to control his appetite for wine, but his indulgence may well be laying a snare for his child that will keep them out of Heaven. In this context we do well to bear the words of I Corinthians 8:9 in mind, *But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak .*

There are many things not specifically forbidden in Scripture that we may properly engage in but which are neither profitable nor convenient " I Corinthians 10:23 *All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not .* In an age when alcohol is one of the Devil's foremost means of ensnaring souls and bringing them to temporal and eternal ruin surely the drinking of alcohol by the Christian is one such matter that is *not expedient .*

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