

## Lesson 5

### WHAT ABOUT THE USE OF WINE?

The problem of drinking alcohol for a Christian is no easy decision if one desires to be totally Biblical. There is a tension between what the Bible permits and what our culture perverts.

There is also the problem of getting Christians to get right Biblical understanding about alcohol and the whole teaching on Christian liberty. The Christian's only criterion for making any decision is the Bible, and what the Bible forbids and allows, the Christian must do.

*"He who forbids what God allows will soon allow what God forbids."*

#### ALCOHOL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

##### Different Words for Wine in the Old Testament

##### **Yayin** (effervesing)

This is the most common title for wine in the Old Testament. Unger says, "In most passages in the Bible where *yayin* is used (83 out of 138), it certainly means *fermented grape juice* and in the remainder it may fairly be presumed to do so. In only four places is it really doubtful (Isa. 16:10; Jer. 40:10-12; Lam. 2:12). (Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, p. 1168).

*Yayin* is used to mean wines of all sorts, although it is used in a more restricted sense to denote red wine.

The intoxicating character of *yayin* is clear in Scripture. It causes staggering, visions and sickness (Prov. 31:5), loss of judgment (Prov. 31:5), loss of time (Isa. 5:11), loudness of behavior (Zech. 9:15), nakedness (Hab. 2:15,16). Noah became drunk with *yayin* (Gen. 9:21) and also Nabal (1 Sam. 25:36, 37) and Ephraim (Isa. 28:1).

Although intoxicating, it was not only permitted to be drunk, but was also used for sacred purposes and spoken of as a blessing: (1) *Yayin* was drunk by those Israelites who returned from captivity and some think this refers ultimately to the drinking of wine in the millennial kingdom (Amos 9:13,14; Joel 3:8; Zech. 9:17); (2) The Nazarite at the completion of his vow was permitted to drink *yayin* (Num. 6:13-20); (3) Israelites were permitted to drink *yayin* (Deut. 14:24-26); (4) *Yayin* was poured out as a drink offering to Jehovah (Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5); (5) *Yayin* made man's heart glad (Psa. 104:15).

Although invariably fermented, *yayin* was not always properly inebriating, and in most instances was but slightly alcoholic, like the *vin ordinaire* of France or cider.

About half the passages in the Old Testament about *yayin* are clearly denunciatory.

There seems to be a *good of yayin* (Gen.27:25; 1 Sam. 16:2, 20; Eccl. 2:3). Yet warnings are definitely used against the abuse of *yayin* (Prov. 31:4-5; Prov. 23:29-35).

*Yayin* would be the equivalent to the Greek word for wine (*oinos*).

Sometimes the intoxicating strength of this wine was lessened by mixing it with water or milk, and some types of *yayin* were stronger than others.

### **Tirosh** (possession)

This type of wine refers to the freshly pressed juice of the grape. Sometimes it is called “new wine” or “sweet wine.” (Neh. 10:39; Prov. 3:10; Isa. 24:7).

As to the intoxicating character of thin drink, the allusion to its effects are confined to a single passage, but this is a most decisive one (Hos. 4:11 and perhaps Judges 9:13). *Tirosh*, therefore, may have been unfermented wine (like grape juice) or so weak in alcoholic content, that it was unnoticeable.

Sometimes *tirosh* is referred to as being still in a cluster of grapes (Isa. 65:8) and at other times the material from which wine is formed (Mic. 6:15). This is why some think it refers to grape juice only.

The rabbins said, “*Tirosh* is new wine; the liquor of the grapes first pressed out which easily takes possession of the mind.” The rabbins saw *tirosh* as having alcoholic content.

Usually when *tirosh* is mentioned it is connected with eating, the only notable exception is Isaiah 62:8-9. Many references are connected with the words “corn” (grain) and “oil” (olive oil).

Possession of this type of wine was an indication of blessing (Joel 2:24; Hosea 9:2; Prov. 3:10).

*Tirosh* is equivalent to the New Testament “sweet wine” (Acts 2:1315 - *gleuchos*).

### **Shekar** (intoxicant)

A highly intoxicating drink distilled from barley, honey, dates, pomegranates, apples, etc. Sometimes it is translated “beer” (NIV). It is referred to 21 times as “strong drink” in the KJV (Lev. 10:9; Psa. 69:12; 1 Sam. 1:15; Num. 28:7). It was used in the service of God (Num. 23:7) and on occasion was permitted to the Israelites (Deut. 14:26). While it is translated “strong drink”, the alcoholic content was probably no more than 14%.

**Chemer** (Deut. 32:14 ; Isa.27:2; Ezra 6:9;7:22; Dan.5:1, 2, 4, 23).

Called “pure” or “neat” wine because it disturbs the head and brain. Jesus regarded *tirosh* and *chemer* as the same.

**Asis** (Isa. 49:26; Joel 1:5). It had a slight alcoholic content (cf. Joel 3:17-18; Amos 9:13)

**Sobe** (Isa. 1:22; Hos. 5:18; Neh. 1:10) It also had a slight alcoholic content.

**Mesek** (Psa. 75:9) A wine mixed with water or aromatics. Highly spiced to improve flavor.

#### The Use of Wine in the Old Testament

**Wine was considered a staple article of food (Gen. 14:18; Num. 6:20; Deut. 14:26; Neh. 5:18; Isa. 55:1,2).**

Wine was drunk undiluted, and wine mixed with water was thought of as ruined (Isa. 1:22). However, the wine, whether *yayin* or *tirosh*, was a very mild wine consisting of 5-8% alcohol or less, and *shekar*, strong drink, was no more than 14% alcohol. R. Laird says, “To begin with, we should remember that the Biblical phrase “strong drink” really means light beverages. People in Bible times had nothing to correspond to our strong drinks of today. Natural fermentation only gives a product with about 14% of alcohol. With, more than this the yeast cells are killed by the alcohol. Any stronger liquor must be obtained by distillation or freezing. Since neither of these processes of beverage making was known in ancient times, it follows that they never had any beverage which we would call “strong drink”.. As a matter of fact, wine and beer in ancient Palestine were not over 5% or 8% because the limited sugar content in the natural grape juice and malt use or the fermentation. (The Bible and Wine)

The “mixed” or the “mingled wines” of the Old Testament were prepared with aromas aromatic herbs of various sorts to make them taste better or to make them more highly intoxicating (Mark 15:23). Sometimes it was mixed with water to lessen the alcoholic content (Isa. 1:22); sometimes with milk (Song of Sol. 5:1); and sometimes by lovers of strong drink with spices of various kinds to give a stronger flavor or a greater potency (Isa. 5:22; Psa. 65:8).

Wine was regarded as a necessity of life and in no way a luxury. It was a necessary part of the most simple meal (Gen. 14:18; Judg. 19:19; 1 Sam. 16:20; Isa. 55:1).

Wine was drunk by all classes and all ages, even by the very young (Lam. 2:12; Zech. 9:17). Wine is bracketed with grain as a basic food staple (Gen. 27:28).

Tithe was to be paid of wine as other products, and this was to be consumed “before the Lord”, meaning within the precincts of the Temple (Lev. 7:16; Deut. 12:17-18).

Wine was forbidden to the priests during the performing of their sacred duties in the Tabernacle (Lev. 10:9). At other times the priests were at liberty to drink wine.

Excessive indulgence in wine and drunkenness is always condemned (Eccl. 10:17; Isa. 28:7).

#### Exhortations Against Excessive Wine Drinking

1. Wine is a mocker (Prov. 20:1)
2. Wine may bring ruin (Prov. 23:20-21).
3. Wine should not be used by those in places of leadership except as a food staple (Prov. 31:4).
4. Wine impairs one's judgment and spiritual discernment (Prov. 31:5).
5. Wine may be used as a sedative for the dying or the psychotic (Prov. 31:6-7). It must be remembered that wine was the only sedative available in those days. Today there are many effective and less harmful drugs to deal with psychotics and neurotics. No Christian should take wine or drugs if they become a crutch to escape reality and the problems of life.

#### Conclusion

In the Old Testament wine was used by all, except the Nazarite, and primarily as a food staple or in religious rites. In some cases it was used as a sedative. However, "getting high" or drunkenness is forbidden in every case.

The Old Testament speaks in terms of strong condemnation of the effects of wine, but this condemnation is directed against intoxication and excess rather than the substance which is the occasion of the excess.

## ALCOHOL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

### Different Words for Wine in New Testament

**Oinos**. This is the most frequently used word for wine and did have alcoholic content (Eph, 5:18). It is equivalent to *yayin* in the Old Testament..

**Gleuchos**. This type of wine is very similar to *tiros* but has more alcoholic content (Acts 2:13-15).

**Sikers**. This was like *shekar* of the Old Testament (Luke 1:15).

## General Observations about Wine

John the Baptist did not drink wine (Matt. 11:18). He was a Nazarite who touched no fruit of the vine, alcoholic or non-alcoholic.

The Lord Jesus Christ drank wine (Matt. 17:19; Luke 7:34), and He was called a winebibber (boozer) by His enemies. Probably Christ only used wine as a food staple like most people in that day. Some have tried to make a case for Christ drinking only grape juice. They say that His enemies accused Christ of drinking wine, when he really did not, in the same way they accused Him of being an illegitimate child when he was not. Jesus did not take the ascetic life of John and could drink grape juice.

The Lord Jesus Christ did not forbid the use of wine by unbelievers for he turned the water to wine at the marriage feast at Cana (John 2:1-11). Our Lord did not make drinking an issue when dealing with the unsaved. Christ is always the issue. *Drunkenness is an issue but drinking wine is not.*

Those who believe that this wine was grape juice say that according to statistics somewhere between 106 and 160 gallons of wine were made by Christ in this miracle. Therefore, this verse either approves of drunkenness or it was grape juice. The best wine for the last was not necessarily for its alcoholic content but because it was miraculous wine (grape juice) and good tasting.

Paul told Timothy to take a little wine as a medicine for a gastric disorder (1 Tim. 5:23) but this does not allow for taking a "little nip". Timothy was drinking water (he was a non-drinking pastor at Ephesus) before Paul told him to drink wine for his stomach problem. Perhaps Timothy thought it unwise to drink wine as a pastor in order to preserve his testimony.

Those who hold the office of deacon in the local church are not to be given to much wine (1 Tim. 3:8). Literally this means "not being addicted to wine." The idea probably is that wine was to be used only as a basic food staple.

An elder in the local church is to have a sensible viewpoint about wine (1 Tim. 3:3). This means he is not "to linger over the wine cup" and use it basically as a food staple.

The writers of Scripture are constantly reminding people about the excesses of wine (Eph. 5:18; 1 Pet. 4:3).

## **MIXING OF WINE WITH WATER**

### Greeks and Romans

After the Old Testament period, there is an emphasis upon wine being mixed with water. In fact, diluted wine became so popular that the author of 2 Maccabees speaks of undiluted wine as "distasteful" (2 Macc. 15:39). The cutting of wine with water was especially popular among the Greeks and Romans and appears to be the custom among the Jews in the inter-testament period.

In ancient times wine was stored in large pointed jars called *amphorae*. When wine was to be used it was poured from the *amphorae* into large bowls called *kraters* where it was mixed with water. From these *kraters*, cups or *kylix* were then filled. The *kylix* were filled not from the *amphorae* but from the *kraters*, so we know they drank a mixed drink, diluted with water. This drink was diluted to have a mild tartness--like our soft drinks--and was used as a drink between meals. It was alcoholic in content but the alcoholic content was very low.

The ratio of water to wine varied with the drink. Homer mentions a ratio of 20 to 1 (Odyssey IX, 208f); that is, 20 parts water to 1 part wine. Pliny mentions a ratio of 8 parts water to 1 part wine (Natural History, XIV, VI, 54). The ratio, however was usually 3 or 4 parts water to 1 part wine. Sometimes the ratio goes down to 1 to 1 (and even lower), but it should be noted that such a mixture is referred to as "strong wine." Drinking wine unmixed was looked upon as a "Scythian" or a barbarian custom.

For the Greeks and Romans the term wine in the ancient world did not mean wine as we understand it today, but wine mixed with water. Usually a writer simply referred to the mixture of water and wine as "wine". To indicate the beverage was not a mixture of water and wine a writer would say "unmixed (*akratesteron*) wine."

Why was wine cut with water? First, in ancient times there were not many beverages safe to drink. The water was easily contaminated and the only way it could be made safe for drinking was to boil it (this was very costly and tedious) or to mix it with wine so as to have the mild alcoholic content to kill the germs. Second, by cutting the wine with water, a merchant could make more money. Third, it was less intoxicating.

## **Jew**

We do have some examples from before and around the time of Christ to show that drinking wine in the Jewish society was not substantially different from that of the Greeks and Romans. The 1901 Jewish Encyclopedia (Vol. 12, p. 533) states that in the rabbinic period at least *yayin* (wine) is to be distinguished from *shekar* (strong drink): the former is diluted with water (*mazug*); the latter is undiluted (*yayin hai*). The Talmud (oral tradition) has several tractates in which the mixture of water and wine is discussed. The Mish takes cut wine for granted. Rabbi Eliezer even forbade saying the table blessing over undiluted wine (Berakhoth 7:5). The proportion of water was large, only one-third or one fourth of the total mixture being wine. Also in 2 Maccabees 15:39 it says, "It is harmful to drink wine alone, while wine mixed with water is sweet and delicious and enhances enjoyment."

## **Passover**

During the Passover ritual of the Jews, it is clearly stated that the four cups every Jew was to drink was to be mixed in a ratio of three parts of water to one part wine (Pesahim 108b). This wine was to be eaten with the Pascal lamb, and the water was also mixed with wine because it was considered too strong to be drunk alone

The Gemara says, "The cup of blessing is not to be blessed until it is mixed with water." When ascetics brought the objection, "How can intoxication be avoided?" The rabbins replied, "Because wine between eating does not intoxicate a man."

The contents of the cup are specifically described by our Lord as "the fruit of the vine" (Matt. 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:18). The wine was mixed with warm water on this occasion as seen in the warming kettle (Pesach 7:13).

### **The Lord's Table**

The Lord's Table was originally somewhat patterned after the Passover Supper. In the writings of the early Church fathers, it is clear that "wine" means wine mixed with water. Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) said of the Lord's Table, "Bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president sends up prayers and thanksgiving" (Apology I, 67:5). Hippolytus (A.D. 215) said of the Lord's Table, "The bishops shall eucharistize (bless) first the bread into representation of the Flesh of Christ; and the cup mixed with wine for the antitype of the Blood which was shed for all who have believed in Him" (Apostles Tradition XXIII, 1). Cyprian said, "... the cup should be offered mingled with water" (Epistle LXII, 2, 11, 13).

Unmixed wine and plain water at the Lord's Supper were both found unacceptable. A mixture of wine and water was the norm.

However, the Lord's Table was soon corrupted by many Christians because they were getting drunk at the Lord's Table which was divided into the Agape Feast and the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:20,22). Perhaps this occurred because they did not use diluted wine.

Clement of Alexandria said, "It is best for the wine to be mixed with as much water as possible ...for both are works of God, and the mixing of the two, both of water and wine produces health, because life is composed of a necessary element and a useful element. To the necessary element, the water, which is in the greatest quantity, there is to be mixed in some of the useful element" (Instructor 11, 11, 23:3-24).

### Conclusion

#### **Wine in the New Testament was of light alcoholic content and drunk by the Lord Jesus and Christians and was used basically as a food staple.**

The wine of the New Testament was not like our modern day wines with such high alcoholic content and it certainly does not permit the drinking of distilled spirits. Robert H. Stein makes this comment. "To consume the amount of alcohol that is in two martinis by drinking wine containing three parts water to one part wine, one would have to drink over twenty-two glasses. In other words, it is impossible to become intoxicated from wine mixed with three parts of water, but one's drinking would probably affect the bladder long before it affected the mind." (Wine Drinking In The New Testament Time)

We must conclude that the wine mentioned in the New Testament, while alcoholic, was quite different from the wine bottled today.

Many warnings are given in the New Testament about the abuse of wine (Eph. 5:18; 1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 5:21; Rom. 13:13).

#### ALCOHOL AND CHURCH HISTORY

**There have been some great Christian men who drank wine such as Calvin, Spurgeon and Luther. Most of these men drank wine only with their meals. However, Luther may have drunk too much. Luther was wrong for his times of excessive drinking because he did not take heed to the Word of God in this area.**

There are areas of the world today where believers drink wine at meal time. This does not mean, however, that all Christians should follow the same pattern as those in different parts of the world. For instance, America has a peculiar evil twist on alcohol unknown to other countries.

#### ALCOHOL AND HEALTH

Present day research may be indicating that a light wine (small amount of alcoholic content) may be beneficial to one's health when used as a food staple at meals. Research is showing that a limited amount of wine may cut down cholesterol and triglycerides and also may be a natural sedative.

However, it is also being proven that any type of drunkenness is bad for a person's health. It's long been held report contends that cells. An article from the *Parade Magazine* said, "Although it's long been held that excessive drinking damages the brain, a new report contends that even "moderate social drinking" destroys brain cells. According to Dr. Melvin H. Knisely, professor of anatomy at the Medical College of South Carolina, even a little alcohol is not little enough. In his report to the 28<sup>th</sup> International Congress on Alcohol and alcoholism, he offered evidence to show that when a drinker begins to feel giddy, a few of his brain cells are being killed. And, in extension of this, a heavy drinking bout can damage or destroy as many as 10,000 such cells.

#### ALCOHOL AND HUMANITARIANISM

Every Christian is a humanitarian and should be concerned about his fellow man. The evil effects of alcohol are astronomical in every culture, and the Christian should lead the way to help this social problem. It may help by abstaining from the use of alcohol.

Alcohol consumption among young people poses a great problem for most societies, even though it is usually illegal.

Every culture experienced crime, deaths, beatings, accidents and suicides because of the misuse of alcohol.



Alcohol causes birth defects involving mental retardation.

Hunger, brutality, joblessness, broken homes, and much immorality can be attributed to alcohol.

Businesses lose billions in revenue because of alcoholism.

#### ALCOHOL AND CHRISTIAN'S TESTIMONY

The Bible no where says it is wrong for a believer to drink wine. In light of the biblical use of wine, it is difficult to justify the use of hard liquors such as vodka or whiskey.

The Bible dogmatically asserts that drunkenness is sin. Drunkenness is anything from a "glow" to total saturation. If a person drinks for the effects of wine, then he should give it up. If he drinks to be sociable, then he should ask himself what is his true motive for participating. Is it to please the crowd or please the Lord (1 Cor. 10:31)?

Because of the horrible misuse of alcohol in most cultures today, drinking in moderation or the "social drink" by Christians becomes a questionable practice or a doubtful thing. The Bible constantly exhorts the mature Christian to gladly give up that which is all right to do for the sake of the weaker Christian and his testimony to the non-Christian world. The ultimate principle seems to be set forth by the Apostle Paul who said, ***"Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews (unsaved religious people), Greeks (unsaved non-religious people) or the church of God (saved people)" (1 Cor. 10:32). "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall (Rom. 14:21)."***

The Christian should apply the principle of love (1 Cor. 8:9), the principle of expediency (1 Cor. 6:12), the principle of God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31) and the principle of extreme sacrifice (1 Cor. 8:12; 9:19-23; 10:33) to his present culture.

#### POINTS TO PONDER BEFORE USING ALCOHOL

A Christian's love for humanity should cause him to want to set an example before the multiple millions of alcoholics in the world.

It costs a lot of money to buy alcohol, and this money could probably be better used somewhere else.

If a Christian chooses to use alcohol, can he be sure his children will be able to handle alcohol the same way? Christians must set an example before their children.

A Christian should not want to do anything which would cause his brother to be offended or stumble.

Christians who are in positions of leadership in the church, while they have liberty to use wine, should think before partaking of wine or any alcohol since they are to be examples to the flock. How will the flock react if they know the pastor, elders or deacons drink alcohol?

A Christian should not want to do anything to potentially destroy his relationship to Christ, his wife, his family and his friends. Alcohol could do that if it is not controlled.