

## **CHRISTIANS AND DRINKING ALCOHOL**

### **Explaining a Few Things From the Bible**

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#### **VIEWPOINTS IN THE CHURCH**

It is very widely accepted by responsible members of our society that while “binge drinking” and drunkenness is a bad thing, the drinking of alcohol is a pleasure to be enjoyed: it is only the excess that is wrong. And there are many Christians who would agree with this. For some Christians, drinking wine, beer, or whatever you like, is such a normal part of life that it really does not need any justification. But other commentators have thought about it carefully, and have concluded that there are five good reasons for accepting that we are free to enjoy alcohol in moderation - reasons (they maintain) all based on the Bible. A Christian who upholds his “freedom to choose to drink” may tell you: “How, in the light of these Bible teachings, could anyone possibly contend that alcohol is something a Christian should avoid?”

But there are solid grounds for recognizing that these “five biblical reasons” are actually in error: these five assertions are based on a misunderstanding and wrong interpretation of the Bible. The real facts are not what these assertions claim them to be. Indeed, there is good reason to abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages of any kind, even in (so-called) “moderation”.

What are these “five biblical reasons” which are said to endorse the drinking of alcohol, and thus to grant us the “freedom” to be a drinker today? And on what grounds could these biblical reasons be called into question, and held to be mistaken? If we wish to be “biblical Christians” in this matter, we should certainly give these five reasons our thoughtful consideration.

#### **THE FIVE BIBLICAL REASONS ADVANCED IN SUPPORT OF MODERATE DRINKING**

1. The Bible specifically approves the drinking of alcohol, for wine is said to be one of God’s good gifts to us, for our enjoyment: only *excess* is condemned.

2. The term “wine” in the Bible is obviously referring to *alcoholic* wine, for it is drunk all year round and clearly grapes and grape juice would not keep unfermented all year round. (Thus the wine at Passover must be fermented, as this feast falls so long after the grape harvest.)

3. In the New Testament, Jesus himself is described as a wine drinker - in this, he is giving us his own example.

4. There cannot be anything wrong with our indulging in drinking alcohol seeing that Jesus miraculously supplied a huge amount of it for a wedding feast.

5. Jesus chose alcoholic wine to represent his blood in the celebrating of the Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper.

These five assertions seem at first glance to present a pretty impressive case for accepting the drinking of alcohol, drawn as they are from both Old Testament and New, from precept and practice and circumstance. But do they really stand investigation?

#### **ASSESSMENT, SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This article examines and assesses the biblical evidence that is claimed to support drinking of alcohol if in moderation. It shows that the conclusion approving “moderate” drinking is based on a misunderstanding and wrong interpretation of the Bible. The real facts are rather different.

The article sets out, to the contrary, good reasons to abstain from alcohol altogether.

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### VIEWPOINTS IN THE CHURCH

It is very widely accepted by responsible members of our society that while “binge drinking” and drunkenness is a bad thing, the drinking of alcohol is a pleasure to be enjoyed: it is only the excess that is wrong. And there are many Christians who would agree with this. For some Christians, drinking wine, beer, or whatever you like, is such a normal part of life that it really does not need any justification. But other commentators have thought about it carefully, and have concluded that there are five good reasons for accepting that we are free to enjoy alcohol in moderation - reasons (they maintain) all based on the Bible. A Christian who upholds his “freedom to choose to drink” may tell you: “How, in the light of these Bible teachings, could anyone possibly contend that alcohol is something a Christian should avoid?”

But there are solid grounds for recognizing that these “five biblical reasons” are actually in error: these five assertions are based on a misunderstanding and wrong interpretation of the Bible. The real facts are not what these assertions claim them to be. Indeed, there is good reason to abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages of any kind, even in (so-called) “moderation”.

What are these “five biblical reasons” which are said to endorse the drinking of alcohol, and thus to grant us the “freedom” to be a drinker today? And on what grounds could these biblical reasons be called into question, and held to be mistaken? If we wish to be “biblical Christians” in this matter, we should certainly give these reasons our thoughtful consideration.

The first of these five reasons is the view that the Bible specifically approves the drinking of alcohol, for wine is said to be one of God’s good gifts to us, for our enjoyment: only *excess* is condemned. The second reason, related to this, is the claim that the term “wine” in the Bible is obviously referring to *alcoholic* wine, for it is drunk all year round and clearly grapes and grape juice would not keep unfermented all year round. (Thus the wine at Passover must be fermented, as this feast falls so long after the grape harvest.)

Then the third reason, in the New Testament, is that Jesus himself is described as a wine drinker - in this, he is giving us his own example. Fourthly, that there cannot be anything wrong with our indulging in drinking alcohol seeing that Jesus miraculously supplied a huge amount of it for a wedding feast. And fifthly, that he chose alcoholic wine to represent his blood in the celebrating of the Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper.

These five assertions seem at first glance to present a pretty impressive case for accepting alcohol, drawn as they are from both Old Testament and New, from precept and practice and circumstance. But do they really stand investigation? This article examines the biblical evidence claimed to support drinking if in moderation, and sets out, to the contrary, good reasons to abstain from alcohol altogether.

So then: let us first investigate these five reasons put forward to show our freedom to participate in moderate drinking.

#### 1. “Wine is said in the Bible to be one of God’s good gifts to us, for our enjoyment”

We find verses in the Bible, such as Ps 104:14-15, which tell that God gives mankind, from the earth, “...wine to gladden the heart of man”. Similarly Eccl 9:7, “Go, eat your bread in joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.” And Eccl 10:19 tells us, “Bread is made for laughter, and wine gladdens life ...”

What clearer word from Scripture could a person want than this? Thus, obviously (it is said), the Bible approves the drinking of alcohol, for wine is stated to be one of God’s good gifts to us, for our enjoyment: and only *excess* is condemned.

Let us check on this word “wine” in the Old Testament. We will find, first of all, that there are several words in the Hebrew for wine. Now, a considerable measure of confusion is generated initially by the fact that in its everyday use the English word “wine” is almost invariably referring to alcoholic wine, whereas this word “wine” is the word regularly used in the English Bible for translating these different Hebrew words - and “wine” has a much wider range of meaning in the Hebrew text.

The two most frequently used Hebrew words - and these are the ones which primarily concern us here - are *tirosh* and *yayin*. The first of these, *tirosh*, refers to grape juice, **must**, unfermented wine; the latter, *yayin*, is used in the Bible to refer to the liquid product of the grape at all stages, from when it is still in the grape on the vine to when it has become intoxicating wine. Examples of the use of these words:

**(a) Wine as the juice within the grape in the cluster on the vine:**

Isa 65:8: “As the new wine is found in the cluster ...”;

Jer 40:12 “ ... then all the Judeans returned from all the places to which they had been driven and came back to the land of Judah, to Gadaliah at Mizpah. And they gathered wine and summer fruits in abundance.” [As is clear in context, what they gathered were grapes and fruit, from the vines and trees of the deserted land; alcoholic wine is not “gathered” from the fields.]

Isa 62:8-9: “ ... foreigners shall not drink your wine ... but ... those who gather it shall drink it.” [What are gathered are grapes, and “wine” here refers to the juice while still within the gathered grapes.]

So also Deut 11:14.

**(b) Wine as the juice when it is extracted from the grape in the winepress:**

Jer 48:33: “I have made the wine cease from the winepresses; no one treads them with shouts of joy ...”

Isa 16:10: “no treader treads out wine in the presses ...”

Neh 13:15: the Judeans were treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and when this produce is loaded onto donkeys for transport it is referred to as “wine”.

Prov 3:10: “... your vats will be bursting with wine.” Also Joel 2:24: “... the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.” Similarly Hos 9:2. [The vats are where the wine (i.e. grape juice) is collected from treading the grapes.]

Note that what is used to obtain the **grape juice** is called a **winepress**.

**(c) Where wine refers to fresh grape juice, in the NIV translated as “new wine”:**

Judg 9:27: the men went out into the field and gathered grapes from their vineyards, which they trod, and then held a festival where they ate and drank: in context, they were consuming what they had just produced: which was grape juice.

Lam 2:12: in the terrible time of famine “infants and babies faint in the streets of the city. They cry to their mothers, ‘Where is bread and wine?’” They are not crying for alcoholic wine! They are crying for the grape juice which would have been a part of their normal diet.

Zech 9:17: “New wine” (*tirosh*) makes young women flourish.

**(d) Wine as causing intoxication:**

Numerous examples of intoxicating wine will be found, in the Old Testament all of them being the use of the Hebrew word *yayin*. The earliest are in Gen (Noah: 9:20-21; Lot: 19:32-35). Proverbs warns against wine that makes one drunk (*yayin*, when fermented): 20:1; 21:17; 23:20-21; 23:29-35; 31:4-5); also Isa 5:11; Hab 2:5. In Isaiah’s time both prophet and priest succumbed to wine, with vividly described consequences (28:7-8). Woe to those inflamed by wine! (Isa 5:11-12).

There is no question that *yayin* means fermented, alcoholic wine. The point at issue is whether it **always and only** means this. The evidence shows that, no: its meaning is wider.

There is no such condemnation, as for intoxicating *yayin*, of *tirosh*, which is “must, fresh or new wine” (*Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*, p.641; and also *Theological Wordbook of the Old*

*Testament*, p.969): *tirosh* is never associated with drunkenness. *Tirosh* is called a blessing provided by God: Gen 27:28; Deut 7:13; 11:13-14; 33:28; Prov 3:9-10; Jer 31:12; it is the wine which “cheers God and men” (Judg 9:13; similarly Ps 4:7); it is the “best of the wine” (Num 18:12).

These are some of the references to *tirosh* as the provision of God. This word occurs 38 times in the Old Testament; for 34 of these occurrences it is rendered in the NIV as “new wine”, i.e. fresh (not fermented) wine: grape juice. The translation of *tirosh* into English varies in the different translations - occasionally “juice”, usually just “wine”, but in the NIV, “new wine”.

In contrast, the Hebrew *yayin*, which can be used in reference to either fermented wine or unfermented wine (grape juice), is invariably rendered into English simply as “wine”. In his detailed book *Wine in the Bible*, the scholar Dr Samuele Bacchiocchi notes (p.65) that the use of this word is carefully examined in the Ph.D. dissertation of Robert Teachout, and he comments on this,

According to Robert Teachout’s tabulation of the 141 references to *yayin* in the Old Testament, 71 times the word refers to unfermented grape juice and 70 times to fermented wine. This tabulation may not necessarily be accurate, since in certain instances the context is unclear. ... [But] it is important simply to establish that *yayin* is sometimes used in the Old Testament to refer to the unfermented juice of the grape.

Similarly to *yayin* in the Old Testament, the word “wine”, οἶνος, *oinos*, in the Greek New Testament, is a generic term for the produce of the grape, whether fermented or unfermented (grape juice). We can recognize this, first of all, from the way in which *oinos* is used regularly to translate *yayin*, with its parallel range of meaning. And then on 33 occasions the LXX also translates *tirosh* simply as οἶνος, *oinos*. That is to say, unfermented grape juice is included within the range of meaning of this Greek word.

Secondly, in Mt 9:17//Mk 2:22//Lk 5:37-38 Jesus speaks of putting new wine (*oinos*) into new wineskins. This is not referring to putting wine into new wineskins so that it ferments there, for no matter how good these new skins they would not be able to resist the expansive force of the gas generated by fermentation, and they would most certainly explode. Dr Bacchiocchi explains (p.72) that clearly Christ is ...

“referring to wine fresh from the press which was strained and possibly boiled, and then placed immediately into new wineskins made airtight, possibly by a film of oil on the opening of the wineskin. ... Christ’s words suggest that ‘new wine’ was placed into fresh wineskins to insure the absence of any fermentation-causing substance.”

Such problems could be expected in old wineskins. Christ’s illustration indicates the intention was to retain the wine in its unfermented state.

Furthermore, there are numerous instances in early Christian writers which illustrate the way in which *oinos* was used in reference to unfermented wine, *must*, grape juice.

Those who fail to take account of this range of meaning of “wine” in the Bible and in early Christian writings, and who automatically apply the usual meaning of the English word “wine” (i.e., an alcoholic beverage) to all biblical use of the term, are certain to misread the meaning of numbers of biblical passages which refer to wine, both in the Old Testament and the New.

## 2. “Grapes and grape juice would not keep for long, but would ferment”

Upon the belief behind this assertion is based the conclusion that “the term ‘wine’ in the Bible is clearly referring to *alcoholic* wine, for it is drunk all year round and obviously grapes and grape juice would not keep unfermented all year round.” (Thus the wine at Passover must be fermented, as this feast falls so long after the grape harvest.)

But this uninformed comment can distort our understanding of the situation existing in biblical times. It appears that many Christian interpreters are unaware of the actual situation in this regard in the Middle East - those commentators who say this should make themselves aware of the four different methods in use in the ancient Mediterranean world for the preservation of grape juice. Dr Bacchiocchi describes these methods in detail (pp.106-127), quoting the descriptions from the ancient writers who give them. He shows clearly (p.128) “that the means of preserving grape juice without fermentation were known and used in the ancient world”. One common method was to boil

the grape juice to evaporate most of the water and produce *must* as a thick paste, which was kept in sealed, airtight wineskins and was reconstituted for drinking with the addition of water.

Those of us well familiar with our own ready access to supermarket shelves groaning under the weight of a multiplicity of modern beverages should pause and ask ourselves: In biblical times, what were the alternatives available for ordinary people to drink in the ordinary course of their lives, to quench their thirst?

We read of pomegranate juice (Song 7:12; 8:2). But by far the most usual drink was water. Thus Isaiah 55:1 begins, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters ...” But this verse is also a call to “buy wine and milk, without money and without price” The prophet is introducing his message with a spiritual metaphor; but it is grounded in what the people would have had for drinking at that time.

Now, it is completely clear from numbers of references that the wine drunk was indeed alcoholic wine on occasion. From this, and from the many references to “wine” in the English Bible, it has often been presumed that alcoholic wine was the common drink of the period, normally on the table for a meal. And thus, by extension of this presumption, it is often considered that the disciples would have had a cup of alcoholic wine regularly at their meals.

But in fact it is quite unlikely that the disciples had wine with their meals, and in the absence of evidence that they did, such an assumption cannot be made. This point is explained by Joachim Jeremias (*The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, pp.50-52):

“Wine was drunk only on festive occasions ... Otherwise wine was generally used in everyday life only for medicinal purposes; it was regarded as an excellent medicine. In everyday life water was drunk. The daily breakfast consisted of ‘bread with salt and a tankard of water’, and even at the main meal bread and water were the chief ingredients ... It is ... quite out of the question that Jesus and his disciples should have drunk wine with their daily meals.”

However, the fact is that *tirosh*, “new wine”, i.e. grape juice, was a common drink of the time: it was drunk fresh when it was available, or reconstituted from *must* when grapes were out of season. There are numerous mentions in the Old Testament to how beneficial and enjoyable a cup of cold grape juice is. A clear example of grape juice as a preferred beverage is in the story of the Pharaoh’s cupbearer. In this story, we find (Gen 40:11) the cupbearer of the king describing to Joseph how in his dream “Pharaoh’s cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh’s cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand.” This story indicates that providing fresh grape juice was his normal duty that he regularly performed in serving Pharaoh (verses 13 and 21).

Trouble is, we frequently do not recognize the various other references to drinking grape juice for what they are because of the way in which most translations use here the word “wine” - and thus we commonly interpret these as references to *alcoholic* wine.

Here the NIV’s practice of translating *tirosh* as “new wine” is helpful in recognizing the difference. Thus for example, Prov 3:10 tells us in the RSV, ESV, NRSV, and other versions, that if you honour the Lord with your substance and with your firstfruits then your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats with wine. But the NIV allows us to know that this wine is “new wine”, *tirosh*, grape juice: well suited for drinking, and for storage by methods which will preserve it from fermenting, to be available for drinking “out of season”.

### 3. “Jesus was a winedrinker - which sets us our example”

This is the first of three lines of argument in favour of wine drinking which are drawn from the New Testament: Firstly, that Jesus himself is described as a wine drinker, and in this he is giving us his own example. Secondly, there cannot be anything wrong with our indulging in drinking alcohol as Jesus miraculously supplied a huge amount of it for a wedding feast. And thirdly, he also chose alcoholic wine to represent his blood in the celebrating of the Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper.

Now, does the Bible actually say that Jesus was a wine drinker? Yes it does: in Mt 11:19 and Lk 7:34. But wait a moment: let us look more carefully at just who is making this assertion in the Gospels. Jesus is here quoting the allegation of his sceptics, his enemies. *They* are the ones who called him a “glutton and a habitual wine drinker”. When they said he was a glutton, are we to believe that this is true? Are we then to jump immediately to the assumption that the accusation about his wine drinking is true?

This is the “where there’s smoke there’s fire” method of arguing: that is, there must have been *some* basis for their accusation! But will we also apply this kind of assumption to the other things of which his enemies accused him? In fact, Christ’s very next words indicate the surmise upon which it is based: for they also accused him of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners”, and doubtless - they assumed - when he was dining with such riffraff (e.g., Mt 9:10) he indulged himself to the full.

But wait: did not Jesus himself say that he “came eating and drinking” (Mt 11:19/Lk 7:34)? And as this is said as a contrast to John the Baptist, who did not drink alcohol, this must mean that Jesus was attesting that he drank wine. Thus, Gentry deduces, “he mentions that he publicly drank wine, which gave opportunity for his critics to call him a drunkard”. (Kenneth L. Gentry, “The Bible and the Question of Alcoholic Beverages”, CTR 5/2, Spring 2008, 45.) But Jesus says only that he “came drinking”, without saying what he was drinking, and the assumption that it had to be wine is drawn (by those who have already decided that this has to be the case) that it must have been *fermented wine*. This is circular reasoning. The point Jesus is making is the way his enemies are determined to find fault and to jump to negative conclusions which go beyond the evidence - in doing this, Jesus is contrasting his social behavior with that of the abstemious Baptist without this comment requiring that Jesus drank anything, whatever it was, that others may have drunk. But the fact is that neither Jesus himself nor anyone else (apart from his enemies) ever attests that he drank *alcoholic wine*: and it is neither scholarly nor valid to *assume* that he did, and then use this as an argument for saying that he did. If the only “evidence” that we have for Jesus drinking alcohol is the accusation of his enemies, do we thus accept what they have said? How firm a foundation is that?!

But wait! Didn’t Jesus himself give us the evidence for this? At Cana?

#### 4. “Jesus makes gallons of grog for a wedding feast”

For many people this incident is regarded as the situation that puts the conclusion beyond all argument. Jesus is attending a wedding feast (Jn 2:1-2). All the guests would be drinking alcoholic beverages there. The wine runs out. Jesus miraculously creates a new supply for them. Indeed, a very large supply. And his provision was pronounced to be (2:10) “the good wine” or even (some translations) “the best wine”. So then (they say), in the light of all the circumstances of this event, how could anyone possibly argue that this was other than high quality alcoholic wine?

Most commentators on John do not address this question of the nature of the wine at Cana, taking it as a given that it is alcoholic wine. Those who do discuss it will quickly dismiss the possibility that it was grape juice. If interpretation is to be decided on the basis of a majority vote of commentators, then the result is clear. However, I would venture to suggest that many people approach this passage with a preconceived opinion about the meaning of “wine” here that is compounded of what this word means in common current English usage, plus the belief that alcoholic wine is what is to be expected at a wedding feast in New Testament times.

Let us tease out the unconscious assumptions which lie behind this evaluation of the situation. The first assumption is that the word *oinos*, “wine”, in Jn 2 is a reference to fermented, alcoholic, wine. But it has already been pointed out (a) that *oinos* is regularly used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew term *tirosh*, which does not refer to fermented, alcoholic wine, and (b) that there are numerous usages of *oinos* in New Testament times and subsequently in the early church where the context indicates the reference is to unfermented wine (that is, grape juice). Furthermore, (c), *oinos* is also used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew *yayin*, which refers to the whole range of meaning for the produce of the grapevine, from fresh grape juice right through to intoxicating wine. Therefore *oinos* most certainly *may* refer on any particular occasion to intoxicating wine, but need not necessarily do so, so that this cannot be assumed. The use of *oinos* in John 2 does not pre-decide the issue of what kind of wine it was.

The second assumption is that the wine that was running out was alcoholic. This assumption is derived from the first, the assumed meaning of *oinos*, together with the belief that its alcoholic character is indicated in 2:10. Here the Master of the Feast comments about the practice at feasts in general in which it was usual to serve the good wine first and then poor wine later, and he contrasts this with what is happening at this feast, for “you [the bridegroom] have kept the good wine until

now". The implication is clear: the people at this feast have also by this time "drunk freely" (2:10; RSV, ESV). This can be taken to mean "have had too much to drink" (NIV), "have become drunk" (NRSV): interpretations which would indicate that the wine they had been drinking thus far was alcoholic. This may be so: it is beyond possibility to prove that it was *not* alcoholic. But then, it is also beyond possibility to prove that it was. The Greek term to "have drunk freely" does not necessarily indicate that the drink was alcoholic, nor that the drinkers were intoxicated. This interpretation is an assumption.

Next, there is the assumption that the wine Jesus produced by his miracle was alcoholic. The evidence that clinches this interpretation is taken to be the opinion expressed by the Master of the Feast that pronounced the wine Jesus produced as being "the best". This conclusion is self-evident to those who regard it as obvious beyond words that good alcoholic wine is incomparably better than any grape juice. It needs to be recognized though that an abstainer would regard grape juice as better than any kind of alcoholic wine. Thus, the conclusion you come to about the import of the words of the Master of the Feast depends entirely on your point of view before you start to consider the matter.

And we must take care here to avoid "reading back" into New Testament times a distinctly modern attitude as to what being "a good wine" means. The older commentator Albert Barnes, in his discussion of the passage (*Notes on the New Testament: Luke-John*, p.197), points to numerous writers in New Testament times who regarded the best kind of wine as that which was not intoxicating. Moreover, when the Lord is giving Aaron instructions about provision for priests and Levites, he says (Num 18:12, NIV), "I give you all the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain ..." Other translations, "all the best of the wine". And, as the NIV rendering indicates here, the best of the wine, the finest wine, is the "new wine", *tirosh*, wine straight from the grape and unfermented: grape juice.

Some commentators say, "We must understand that the miraculous transformation at Cana would have taken place *after* the water was drawn from the jars, at the time of serving, rather than that all the water in the jars was converted into wine." Possibly so: but when John gives details in his accounts it is because they are significant - what then is the point of his mentioning the number of jars and their capacity, and the instruction to "fill them to the brim", if this is irrelevant, if the miracle of transformation was in the bearing of the water to the feast, so that what remained in the jars remained water? No: rather, John's description of the jars and their filling is to emphasize the size and scope of this miracle.

In this miracle Christ "manifested" (ESV) or "revealed" (NIV) his glory (2:11): was it the glory of Jesus to supply the wedding guests with such an abundance of intoxicating wine that they could thereupon get gloriously drunk? Note the quantity. Six jars each holding upwards of twenty or thirty gallons means a total quantity of somewhere between 100 and 150 gallons, that is, between 500 and 750 litres. Assessment of the situation at this point becomes very subjective. The abstainer says to the moderationist: "Do you genuinely believe that Jesus supplied them with that quantity of alcoholic wine?" The moderationist says to the abstainer, "Do you actually believe that Jesus supplied them with that quantity of grape juice?" Neither can establish his view beyond question. But the point is: the offhand assumption that it *must* have been alcoholic wine at Cana is far from certain.

Are we really to believe that Christ would perform a miracle that opened the door for drunkenness? Neither the evidence nor our understanding of New Testament teaching in general would lead us to such a conclusion.

When we recognize the range of meaning encompassed by the Greek word *oinos*, the evidence for the use of unfermented grape juice in the background of both Old and New Testaments, the various assumptions which lie behind the interpretation that Christ turned water into alcoholic wine at the wedding, and the general teaching of both Testaments about the dangers of alcoholic wine in leading to drunkenness and debauchery, then we can see that there is a good case for interpreting the wine in Jn 2 as being non-alcoholic.

## 5. “Jesus chose alcoholic wine to represent his blood in the Lord’s Supper”

It is very commonly believed that Jesus used alcoholic wine at the Last Supper, and thus this has set a pattern for us - we now should also use it in the celebration of the Holy Communion. And, in view of the fact that Jesus used alcoholic wine in this way on this occasion, so it follows (it is said), that in consequence there would be no basis upon which it could be thought that we could not drink it on other occasions also.

Is this what we find said in the Scriptures? The reality is that when this widely-held belief is examined it is seen actually to be unsupported by any evidence.

What should be in the cup that is drunk by the members of the congregation when they participate in the Holy Communion?

This is clearly to be linked to the answer to a prior question: What was in the cup which Jesus gave his disciples to drink at the Last Supper?

Nowhere in the New Testament is it *expressly* stated what was in the cup at the Last Supper. There is however a very strong implication that it contained “the fruit of the vine”: note that Lk 22:17-18 records Jesus taking the cup, giving thanks, and saying, “Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you that I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” (Similarly, Mt 26:29//Mk 14:25.)

Note that the word “wine” is never used in the New Testament of the contents of the cup.

It is however commonly *assumed* by commentators that the cup at the Last Supper actually contained alcoholic wine. In consequence it is then widely and unquestioningly accepted that alcoholic wine is to be drunk in the Lord's Supper.

How has this interpretation come to be so widely accepted - and followed?

There appear to be seven lines of argument which have led to this assumption. These seven, with a response to each one, are:

¶ 1. Many commentators, accepting the implication in the Gospels that there was the “fruit of the vine” in the cup, then take it as self-evident that “the fruit of the vine” would mean alcoholic wine.

*But* if Jesus meant wine, it would have been quite possible for him to say so. It is almost as if Jesus himself in what he is saying - and the biblical writers in recording it - are all deliberately avoiding use of the word “wine”, which itself (as we have seen earlier) is in any case quite ambiguous in its meaning. If indeed there *was* wine in the cup - especially if it were fermented, alcoholic wine - why does no New Testament writer say so? Instead, Jesus spoke of “the fruit of the vine”, an expression which was used in reference to grape juice, not to alcoholic wine. For example, in *Antiquities of the Jews* 2, 5, 2, in relation to the story of Joseph in Egypt and the regular duties of Pharaoh’s cupbearer (Gen 40:11), Josephus uses this expression “fruit of the vine” in reference to unfermented grape juice.

In his careful and thorough study *Wine in the Bible*, Samuele Bacchiocchi has presented solid grounds (pp.163-168) for holding that there was unfermented grape juice in the cup at the Last Supper, and he then cites a great many writers from the early Christian centuries who refer to, or describe the use at Communion of, juice straight from the grape or freshly squeezed. After presenting his evidence he concludes (p.169) that this testimony “has shown that all of these indicate that our Lord used, and commanded the use of, unfermented, nutritious grape juice to perpetuate the memory of his blood shed for the remission of our sins.”

¶ 2. It is not infrequently objected - oftentimes as a throw-away comment - that the possibility of there being grape juice in the cup at the Last Supper was ruled out because Passover fell such a long time after the grape harvest, and grape juice would not have kept that long without fermenting: fresh grape juice would only ever be available for a short time at the appropriate season.

*But* we have already seen, from the information presented earlier, that this belief is totally mistaken - four methods were in use for preserving grape juice. Any people who say it could not be done are uninformed about the facts. What then would have led to this assumption?

Although there is no mention of “wine” in any New Testament passage referring to either the Last Supper or to Holy Communion, the Greek word *oinos* is at times used in early Christian writers in reference to what is drunk at *their* observances of the Holy Communion. This is then being “read back” historically into the Gospels by some modern writers and teachers, and the

conclusion is being drawn that it indicates that, in the opinion of the early Fathers, *alcoholic* wine was used at the Last Supper. But this is not how the comments of the Fathers should be understood: this is an erroneous and invalid deduction which cannot legitimately be drawn from the evidence.

Noting the practice sometimes mentioned, in connection with the Holy Communion in the early centuries, of mixing wine and water, Leon C. Field (*Oinos: A Discussion of the Bible Wine Question*, p.91; cited in Bacchiocchi p.169) points out that this water was “not necessarily in the weakening of alcoholic wine, but in the thinning of boiled wines and the thick juices of crushed grapes.” Thus for instance Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, vol. 2, part III, question 74, article 5) specifically says, in relation to the wine in the communion cup, “this sacrament can be made from must”.

Awareness of this is relevant, for example, for understanding his meaning when Justin Martyr refers (*First Apology* 65, 67) to the church practice of using wine mixed with water. What kind of wine is he referring to here? Is it to *fermented* wine being mixed with water to break down its alcoholic strength (as many scholars take for granted) - or to the diluting of thick, unfermented *must* into a more suitable consistency for congregational use at Holy Communion?

Thus, first of all, we should recognize that it was perfectly possible to preserve unfermented grape juice as *must*, and to reconstitute it for drinking when required at any time of the year; and that this was practised in the ancient world. There is therefore no validity in the contention that there could not have been unfermented wine available on the occasion of the Last Supper - or for that matter for early church observances of the Holy Communion.

And we need to recognize, furthermore, that the meaning of “wine” in its use in the Bible, and by the early church writers, needs to be interpreted in terms of its context in order to identify whether it refers to grape juice (unfermented wine) or alcoholic wine. Although the word “wine” is nowhere used in the New Testament in reference to the Holy Communion, it is relevant to draw attention here to these facts.

¶ 3. A third line of argument used in support of the contention that alcoholic wine was drunk at the Last Supper is that this meal was being held on the occasion of the Passover, during which (fermented) wine would be drunk.

**But** there is a strong body of opinion that the meal was held the evening before the Passover, and was not itself the Passover (see for instance Jn 13:29). If however the occasion was indeed the Passover, then we should note that at the Last Supper Jesus certainly departed in a number of ways from what we know of the traditional Jewish Passover practice. (It is interesting to note, for instance, that there is no mention of a lamb in the account of the Last Supper.)

In any case, there is strong evidence from Jewish sources (Bacchiocchi sets it out, pp.159-162) that either fermented or unfermented wine (i.e., grape juice) could be used at Passover: there were differing traditions followed by the Jews in this regard. There is no cogency to an argument from Jewish Passover practice to support the “alcoholic wine” position.

¶ 4. Fourthly, it is argued that Paul specifically referred to those who got drunk at the gatherings at Corinth, and the conclusion is drawn: this indicates the use of alcoholic wine at Holy Communion in the apostolic church.

**But** note: If some at Corinth brought in wine, and drank it during the meal, this certainly does not establish that *this* is what was used in the cup for the ritual drink at the Last Supper (nor, for that matter, in the observance at Corinth), any more than we are to suppose that because bread was eaten in the ritual this would therefore be the only type of food consumed in the common meal that is being referred to.

If the Greek word which is used in this context (μεθύω, *methuō*) means “to be intoxicated”, then it does certainly indicate the presence at the meal of an alcoholic drink such as wine. And such behavior is being mentioned by Paul in order to be condemned - such evidence of the presence of alcohol could not be used in support of what *should* be drunk in any observance of the Lord’s Supper.

But does the verb μεθύω, *methuō*, really mean here that there was drunkenness on these occasions at Corinth? This verb also means simply to have drunk one’s fill, and the context in this passage points to this as the meaning here: “while one was left hungry, another was filled to the

full”, i.e. until fully satisfied. Insisting that in this passage this verb means “to be drunk” is to overlook the scope of the verb’s meaning, the thrust of the passage - and the nature of Paul’s criticism. Bacchiocchi (pp.182-187) develops this point fully, together with biblical examples of this meaning of μεθυσω, *methuō*.

¶ 5. Fifthly, wine was used (it is said) for the cup at the Last Supper because, being red, it would carry well the symbolism of blood.

**But** this is really no argument at all against the use of grape juice, which would equally have been of an appropriate color.

¶ 6. Sixthly, it is said by some that wine was the common drink of the day, so it would be the normal and natural beverage to use, not only on the initial occasion at the Last Supper itself but on the subsequent occasions when a congregation came together to observe the Lord's Supper.

**But** this view is very questionable. I have quoted earlier the conclusion of Joachim Jeremias pp.50-52, who ends up by saying on this issue: "It is ... quite out of the question that Jesus and his disciples should have drunk wine with their daily meals." A similar comment is made in other reference volumes: such as Bromily, ISBE 4. p.1070, “wine”: “Wine is not attested as the normal table beverage of OT times. It seems to have been reserved for special occasions.”

This fact does not **disprove** the possibility that there could have been (alcoholic) wine on the table at the Last Supper, but it does counter the glib assumption that there must have been, on the basis that it would have been a normal part of meals in general at that time.

¶ 7. Seventh, it has been said that as wine was definitely used in the Holy Communion at a later time, we may take it that this usage commenced very early; i.e. from the beginning.

I have already answered in part (in my comments, above) this argument of the “reading-back” of later details into the practice of early days: to say the least, this procedure is not always very accurate in the conclusions to which it leads.

However, in any case, the fact of the matter is that later writings do not point so clearly as is sometimes supposed to the widespread use of wine (whether fermented or unfermented). In the first centuries there are many references to celebrations of the Lord's Supper which were held with water in the cup, not wine (Acts of Thomas 120; Acts of Peter 2; Epistle of Cyprian 63, which states that this practice was widespread in Africa in the third century; Acts of Pionius 3; the practice was also found among the Marcionites, the Encratites and the Ebionites). Much could be said in favour of the symbolic value of water for use in the Lord's Supper, for as Scripture calls Christ the Bread of Life so it calls him also the Water of Life (John 4:14; 7:37, 38; 1 Corinthians 10:4).

In Justin's description of the Lord's Supper (*First Apology* 65 and 67) both wine and water are used - which may (as mentioned earlier) be an instance of **must** being diluted with water to produce a suitable non-alcoholic drink for Communion use. On the other hand, this could be a transition stage in a use of water giving way to wine, or a fusion of two separate traditions.

Concerning the use of water in the cup, Andrew McGowan says (p.143):

Yet the most widespread practice other than the use of bread and wine is a case of less rather than more; many church groups seem to have used water rather than wine for the cup of the eucharistic meal ... This and the next two chapters will have the nature of a catalogue of the cases where bread and water (or bread alone) are the elements of the eucharistic meal.

Other early writings refer to other contents for the cup such as milk, honey, and a mixture of the two. (These two became officially prohibited by the Council of Trullo in AD 692: Canon 57; cf. also the Third Council of Braga in AD 675: Canon 1.)

Andrew McGowan's book *Ascetic Eucharists* (Oxford University Press, 1999) gives a comprehensive coverage of all these variants, particularly relevant comments being in Chapter 3, “Food and Drink in Early Christian Meals”; “Milk and Honey”; and Chapter 4 on bread and water.

It is not so much a case, in these various early references, of wine being considered and then rejected in preference for one of these other alternatives: these references (above) to the use of other liquids are rarely the result of some early Christian group having a divergent viewpoint to press. In their context the references tend to show, rather, that their authors consider the use of these other liquids quite normal.

The foregoing seven are the arguments I find advanced for the belief that there was alcoholic wine in the cup at the Last Supper. If these arguments are as forceful as some of their advocates feel, it is worth asking how it was that in the first several centuries of the church there could be such a diversity of practice as to what was used in the cup, including the incontrovertible use, on many occasions and in different areas, of non-alcoholic wine or grape juice, as history reveals.

Thus we are able to say: The arguments in support of the contention that there was (alcoholic) wine in the cup used at the Last Supper do not have much substance. Or perhaps rather we should say, The evidence of the Gospels indicates what kind of wine was in the cup at the Last Supper: it was “the fruit of the vine”, which is grape juice.

An eighth argument has sometimes been brought forward: “Paul counselled Timothy to use wine (1 Tim 5:23), and so we should also.” In this passage Paul tells Timothy that he should “stop drinking only water, but take a little wine for the sake of your stomach” (NRSV). Timothy was, it appears, experiencing an upset stomach (most likely from the poor quality drinking water in Ephesus), and he is being advised not to drink water on its own but with a little wine. This is hardly comparable to the circumstances of the drinking which some people seek to use this passage to justify. Recognizing the medicinal use of alcohol (it is included, for example, in numbers of medicines in common use) cannot possibly be stretched to validate its use as a beverage.

## ASSESSING THE CONTENTION THAT THE BIBLE SUPPORTS DRINKING ALCOHOL

### To summarize the evidence

It is contended by some that the Bible endorses the practice of Christians drinking alcoholic beverages, on the basis of a number of biblical passages, both from the Old Testament and the New, which are said to support this. When these passages are examined, we find that such support is not in fact there. A small number of passages are ambiguous, while most of those cited are not referring to alcoholic drink.

We should recognize a distinction between the current commonly accepted understanding of the meaning of the English word “wine” (which is regularly taken to be a fermented, alcoholic drink) and on the other hand the use of this word in translations of the Bible and in extra-biblical literature, where it is used as the translation of *tirosh*, *yayin*, and *oinos*. It is an error of understanding to take “wine” in the Bible and early Christian writers to refer always to an alcoholic drink - the breadth of the range of the word’s meaning in these contexts always needs to be borne in mind. For these words can be - and are - used both of the fermented and unfermented product of the grape. Sometimes they refer to this entire range of meaning, and more frequently to one or the other, as the context indicates. Many biblical passages speaking of “wine” are referring to unfermented wine, or grape juice.

There are several Bible passages which speak favourably of wine, and *could* be referring to alcoholic wine - but they need not be; and whether these are judged to be referring to alcoholic or to non-alcoholic wine will reflect the subjective view of the interpreter, a view reached on other grounds or on the basis of assumption, seeing that the biblical text does not give certainty one way or the other.

We can say one thing with certainty: the Bible does not clearly validate the drinking of alcohol. We should note that we are not given any basis in Scripture, either by instruction or example, for the use of alcoholic wine either for the Lord’s Supper or for drinking it as a beverage. There are no passages in the Bible which clearly and unequivocally encourage or endorse the drinking of alcohol. On the other hand, the Bible records numerous instances of the drinking of alcoholic wine and strong drink, and illustrates the unfortunate consequences of this, and warns strongly against it. Drunkenness is spoken of as a serious sin.

### What then should we do?

How then can a Christian decide what view and practice to adopt on the issue of consuming alcoholic beverages? Does this lack of certainty in the biblical evidence mean that this is an area where the Christian is free to drink or not drink just as he chooses?

There are a number of biblical principles and other factors which a Christian will want to take into account.

A fundamental issue is that we are to treat our bodies - and our lives, and our relationships with others - with respect. And alcohol is detrimental to the human body, and to every aspect of human life. This point could be illustrated in detail with facts and figures, stories and statistics. But let me rather simply summarize.

Alcohol is a drug which has a detrimental effect upon the human body. Even in small quantities it reduces both our inhibitions and also our conscious control over our thoughts and intentions, our behaviour and our will. We all realize that in excess it can take over completely: what we may not realize is the extent to which even moderate doses will affect us. As we allow alcohol to have its effects upon us, we are to that extent less able to bring our whole body, mind, and spirit in subjection to the Lord. No man can serve two masters - and in small ways and large, alcohol is all too readily able to take over the role of master. We become less able to present our bodies to the Lord as a living sacrifice - we are more conformed to this world, and less transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we discern the will of God. This is the "who's in control?" argument.

There are quite a few alcoholics around. Quite a few people who get themselves hopelessly drunk. Quite a few who have had their lives, their families, disastrously damaged by the ravages of their commitment to alcohol - for alcohol is an addictive drug. It has taken over and ruined a great many lives. Now those people did not intend this to happen when they began drinking; they did not start out their drinking in the beginning by consciously deciding, "If I really get into this, I can ruin everything - I can become an alcoholic." And how many were in fact moderate drinking in the beginning? For the fact is, all of today's drunken derelicts were moderate drinkers once. They will frequently tell you that they have their drinking under control, and they could stop whenever they want. (They just don't want.) People frequently misjudge the extent of their alcoholic indulgence: a regular, steady drinker is very likely to say - and believe - that he/she is just an occasional moderate social drinker. Better never to start to travel this road. An abstainer does not become an alcoholic. This is the "slippery slope" argument.

Some people, by virtue of the way they are constituted, the nature of their metabolism, are actually more at risk of being seized and controlled by alcohol if they start drinking, while others may be relatively less affected. It appears that there is what can be called a "tipping point", which is different for different individuals. It is not a wise idea to see just how far we can go before succumbing. This is the "playing Russian roulette" argument.

Some people turn to alcohol for help and support in some sticky situation that they face: in their work, in a social context, or at a time of personal difficulty, even a family predicament. In a moment of need of some kind or another, their response is, "I want a drink!" In their plight the godly response would be to turn to the Lord in prayer and trust. Their turning to drink is in fact a turning away from God at the very time when they should be learning to trust him more. This is the "my help comes from a bottle" argument.

There is also the principle of "abstain from every appearance of evil", and the question of the influence our behaviour will have on others - the "watch my example" argument. And the cost of alcohol - the "wherever did my money go?" argument. And the "my loose tongue" argument: concern about what we may say when alcohol begins to lubricate our responses.

But the most important argument of all is the "boundary of the permissible" argument. Many people regard drinking alcohol as the exercise of their Christian freedom. Peter wrote (1 Pet 2:16), "Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God." They will protest, "But drinking alcohol is not evil. This is part of what it means that 'Everything is permissible for me'." This is exactly what the Corinthians were saying to Paul (1 Cor 6:12, NIV). For the way in which Paul records and discusses this saying (twice in this verse, and again twice in 10:23) indicates that it was a saying in current use at Corinth, which Paul is quoting. Indeed, there is much to commend the view of numerous scholars that Paul himself was accustomed to say "All things are lawful for me [in certain specific situations]", and the Corinthians are now quoting and misapplying Paul's own words. These words from Paul are an expression of the scope of Christian liberty. But they were being used by some at Corinth as a justification for

decidedly unchristian licence (in the case of the Corinthians, it was in relation to their sexual behaviour).

But the scope of our freedom in Christ is limited, Paul shows, by two things: first, by the test of advantage; second, by the test of enslavement. The first test is positive: not everything that I might do is helpful (that is to say, useful, beneficial, advantageous, profitable); some things could have the reverse result. This test directs my attention to the results of my actions in themselves. The wisdom and validity of an action or course of action is to be evaluated in relation to its consequences. The application of this test will mean that of all the things that I might do, of all the alternatives open to me, I am to choose those that are advantageous (according to Christian standards). Paul's second test is negative: some things that I do can bring me under their power so that my self-control is reduced and my freedom is restricted. Thus my freedom to do as I choose can actually lead to my enslavement. This test directs my attention to the results of my actions upon myself. Actions or activities which affect me adversely in this way are thus clearly wrong for me.

The boundary of what is permissible for a Christian is, on the one hand, the question of what is beneficial, and on the other hand, what will in fact exercise lordship over him in the place of Christ. The point of Paul's response is that if someone is asking, "Is such and such permissible for me?", they are asking the wrong question.

When Paul's "boundary of the permissible" test is applied to drinking alcohol, the outcome is crystal clear. Alcohol is far from beneficial to the individual, both in its effects upon the body and also upon all other aspects of life and relationships. And it significantly dilutes our ability to control ourselves and to submit our lives consciously and effectively and fully to the lordship of Christ, in how we live for him and witness for him and serve him.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

We are able from this survey to recognize that when the relevant biblical references are carefully examined, they do not endorse the drinking of alcohol (as is frequently claimed for them). Either they are in so many instances actually referring to unfermented wine, grape juice, or they are referring to fermented alcoholic drink and pointing out its dangers. In some instances they are unclear in their context concerning the nature of the wine they mention, and they will be interpreted as referring to non-alcoholic wine or to alcoholic wine according to the existing presuppositions and predilections of the interpreter. In other words, these various passages will be seen as supporting a viewpoint that the reader already holds on other grounds (unrelated to what is found in the Bible).

One of the clearest examples of this is in understanding the miracle at Cana: what kind of wine was it that Jesus made? What a person believes about the nature of this wine - as to whether it was intoxicating, or unfermented grape juice - will be informed by the view that (s)he already holds about this topic, for the passage itself could be understood either way.

Those who claim a biblical warrant for drinking alcohol are frequently arguing in a circle and presupposing, when they come to Scripture, what they are supposed to be establishing from its pages. For there are no clear unambiguous passages in Scripture which validate the use of alcoholic beverages.

It can be said that abstainers can also argue in a circle in the same way, so as to see in Scripture what they want or expect to see.

Now, a circular argument is not necessarily wrong in the conclusion that it reaches. But it is not a valid argument for that conclusion. What arguments are there that will support moderate drinking? No arguments from the Bible that are clear and unambiguous. The arguments for drinking tend to be personal ("I like it," "everybody else drinks - why shouldn't I?"), social (alcohol lubricates social relationships; Christians ought to join in the social activities of society; and so forth) or even physical ("alcohol in moderation is beneficial for your health").

However, there are good grounds in Scripture to indicate that it is far better to abstain from indulging even at a "moderate" level in something with so many end consequences that are roundly and unambiguously condemned in the teaching of the Bible.