

Introduction and Comprehensive Look at the Problem of “Social” Drinking

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There is a growing illusion in our society that the common practice of drinking alcohol in social or recreational settings is harmless. That attitude is seeping into the church. As a consequence, society and souls are suffering harm.

My dad used to compare the church to a ship sailing through a sea of worldliness. No matter how stormy the sea, the ship does well as long as you keep the water of the world out of the boat. A lot of the water of the world has seeped into the ship of Zion on the issue of social drinking.

Now, we freely admit that, as Paul Earnhart once observed, “The Bible’s treatment of wine can, *on the surface*, be very puzzling...wine in the Bible is seen both as a blessing and a curse.” But the position espoused nowadays in the pulpits and Bible classes of a lot of ostensibly sound churches indicates that many brethren are not delving very far beneath “the surface” to learn the full truth concerning the social and recreational use of alcoholic beverages. Influenced by the prevailing attitudes of our culture, and by denominational authors whose study of God’s word is sometimes disingenuous, agenda-driven, or just plain shallow, many are openly refusing to condemn the practice of social drinking. Rather, they are overtly or tacitly approving of it. The ambivalence being expressed reminds me of the following story:

*A Congressman was once asked by a constituent to explain his attitude toward whiskey. “If you mean the demon drink that poisons the mind, pollutes the body, desecrates family life, and inflames sinners, then I’m against it,” the Congressman said. “But if you mean the elixir of Christmas cheer, the shield against winter chill, the taxable potion that puts needed funds into public coffers to comfort little crippled children, then I’m for it. This is my position, and I will not compromise.”*¹

While the Biblical teaching on wine may seem confusing on the surface, any right-thinking Bible student surely does not believe that the Scriptures teach opposite things about the common social use of the same substance. The seeming difference in the Bible’s treatment of drinking wine *must* reflect differences in either the use or composition of the wine under consideration, or both. This is the rather inescapable conclusion that brother Earnhart reached in his article.²

We begin here by clarifying the ground on which this preacher stands: From numerous personal observations and anecdotal reports, it is clear that conservative brethren are drifting more and more in the direction of supportive attitudes toward social drinking. This drift is unsupportable by Scripture or by the observable reality of the consequences of social drinking. Ephesians 5:18 commands, “Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit.” Being drunk is clearly the polar opposite from being filled with the Spirit, but far too many Christians now want to live on the equator of the issue! To hold that social drinking is merely a harmless activity is a position that is untenable from either a societal or Biblical standpoint. Such a position is reflective of non-Biblical influences, particularly a culture that views alcohol consumption as normative and the agenda-driven scholarship which seeks to force those cultural norms to mesh with Biblical truth.

I) What constitutes “Social Drinking”?

A) The following definitions from AlcoholRehab.com help will help us form a concept of social drinking that would be acceptable even to many of the world:

- 1) *It is possible to define a social drinker in a number of ways. A definition could be based on the amount the individual drinks or their relationship to alcohol. One way to describe a social drinker would be to say that these are individuals who...*
 - *Only drink occasionally.*
 - *Do not feel the need to drink alcohol in order to have a good time.*
 - *Never get into trouble because of alcohol.*
 - *Don't do or say things they regret while drinking.*
 - *Do not spend a lot of time thinking about alcohol.*
 - *Feel no need to control their intake. Such individuals never drink enough to worry about having to cut back.*
- 2) *Another way to define social drinking would be to consider the safe limits of alcohol use.*
 - (a) *The recommendation is that men between the ages of 21 and 65 should not consume more than 2 drinks a day.*
 - (b) *Women and everyone who is over the age of 65 should not consume more than one drink per day.*
 - (c) *Here a drink is considered a standard beer or a standard glass of wine.*
- 3) *A lot of people would argue that these safe limits are unrealistic.*
 - (a) *A study in the UK found that 83% of respondents believed that those who drank above the safe limits could still be considered social drinkers.*
 - (b) *The results of this survey are worrying because it means that most people are unaware of the risks of drinking in excess of the recommended limits³.*

B) How does the Bible define “Social Drinking”?

- 1) There are numerous descriptions in the Bible of social situations in which drinking wine occurred.
 - (a) As will be discussed in later presentations, it is not always obvious how much alcohol, if any, was contained in the wine being consumed.
 - (b) Some of these drinking events are recorded as part of the fabric of history with little or no moral judgment, while others are depicted in a very negative light (e.g. 2 Samuel 13:28; Esther 1:7-10; Daniel 1:5, 8; 5:1-4; John 2:1-12).
- 2) The Bible term that comes closest to what we refer to as “social drinking” is the term “drinking parties” (NKJV) or “banquetings” (KJV) or “carousing” (var. trans.) found in 1 Peter 4:3. In this passage, drinking for social and recreational purposes is condemned in all of its stages.
 - (a) Drunkenness and revelries (or drunken parties) are mentioned first.
 - (b) Then drinking parties are singled out.

- The term “drinking parties” (Gr. πότος, *potos*) literally refers to "a drinking" without reference to amount.
 - R. C. Trench says concerning *potos* that it is drinking that is “not necessarily excessive.”⁴ He further says that it is related to words of excess in that it gives “opportunity for excess.”
 - The related verb form is *potizo* (Gr. ποτίζω) “to give to drink,” and it is used without implying an excessive amount (e.g. Matt. 10:42 to “give to drink” a “cup of cold water”).
 - While casual moderate drinking is accepted in the world, it is one of the things that a Christian must leave behind (1 Peter 4:3-5).
- C) Social drinking leads to many physical, social, family, and spiritual problems.
- 1) Alcohol often deceives the casual user into thinking he is not adversely affected by it, and that it will alleviate problems and make life more enjoyable. In this way, countless souls have been led astray by alcohol (Prov. 20:1).
 - 2) Drinking alcohol solves few problems and creates many. It impairs judgment and contributes to many interpersonal and societal problems. It is addictive and enslaving.
 - 3) Serious character flaws and spiritual shortcomings typically develop with the use of alcohol (Isa. 5:11-12, 21-23).

II) The Social Costs of Social Drinking: A Needed Reality Check!

- A) Acceptance of drinking alcohol is engrained in our culture at every turn.
- 1) Drinking is made to look enjoyable in advertisements, TV, and movies.
 - 2) Over \$2 billion per year is spent by advertisers (That’s 2,000 million dollars!).
 - 3) We’re told that is okay to drink if we “drink responsibly.” But how many people who drink always drink responsibly even by their own standards?
- B) Our society (and many Christians who live in it) desperately need a reality check and a wake-up call on the issue of drinking alcohol. We are asleep and dreaming in a fantasy land if we go about day by day in denial of the serious spiritual and physical harm caused by alcohol!
- 1) Our culture focuses attention on making sure that homosexuals are not mistreated but rather celebrated, and that children eat their vegetables, and that adults not be allowed to order a large size sugary soft drink!
 - 2) In the meantime, the real life consequences of drinking are virtually ignored. About the only issue our culture has with drinking at all is the issue of drinking and driving.
- C) Here are some *sobering* facts!
- 1) **Drunk driving** is a serious alcohol related problem (but by no means the only one).
 - (a) Over 10,000 deaths per year in the U.S. are related to drinking and driving.
 - (b) On average, every 90 seconds someone is injured in a drunk driving crash.⁵
 - (c) Many of us have lost loved ones, friends and acquaintances because of those who drink and drive.
 - (d) The NHTSA (1999) estimated that 4 million people are victimized each year by 2.6 million drunk driving crashes. Not every victim is killed, but many are injured, maimed or disfigured!

- (e) The cost of drunk driving crashes in American is \$130 billion annually.
- 2) **Connection to Crime.** Nearly 40% of prison inmates serving time for a violent offense say that they were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the offense.⁶
- 3) **Effects on home and personal life.**
- (a) Domestic violence. Law enforcement officers consistently report that alcohol is a major factor in the vast majority of domestic violence reports.
 - (b) Break up of families. Studies have shown that the more you drink, the more likely you are to get divorced – there is a direct correlation.⁷
 - (c) Misspent paychecks. Money is squandered on alcohol that is needed for food, shelter or other necessities.
 - (d) Risky sexual behavior and unintended pregnancies.
 - (e) Job performance, employment, and injury.
 - (i) *Companies view social drinkers as less employable.*⁸
 - (ii) *Breathalyzer tests detected alcohol in 16% of emergency room patients injured at work.*
 - (iii) *Analyses of workplace fatalities showed that at least 11% of the victims had been drinking.*
 - (iv) *Large federal surveys show that 24% of workers report drinking during the workday at least once in the past year.*
 - (v) *One-fifth of workers and managers across a wide range of industries and company sizes report that a coworker's on or off-the-job drinking jeopardized their own productivity and safety.*⁹
- 4) Health risks
- (a) Alcohol is a factor in many diseases and deaths according to the *National Institutes of Health*.¹⁰ Drinking too much – on a single occasion or over time – can take a serious toll on your health. Alcohol's negative effects on the human body include but are not limited to the following:
- **Brain:** *Alcohol interferes with the brain's communication pathways, and can affect the way the brain looks and works. These disruptions can change mood and behavior, and make it harder to think clearly and move with coordination.*
 - **Liver:** *Heavy drinking takes a toll on the liver, and can lead to a variety of problems and liver inflammations including: Steatosis, or fatty liver, Alcoholic hepatitis, Fibrosis, Cirrhosis*
 - **Pancreas:** *Alcohol causes the pancreas to produce toxic substances that can eventually lead to pancreatitis, a dangerous inflammation and swelling of the blood vessels in the pancreas that prevents proper digestion.*
 - **Cancer:** *Drinking too much alcohol can increase your risk of developing certain cancers, including cancers of the mouth, esophagus, throat, liver, and breast.*
 - **Immune System:** *Drinking too much can weaken your immune system, making your body a much easier target for disease. Drinking a lot on a single occasion slows your body's ability to ward off infections – even up to 24 hours after getting drunk.*

(b) According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the “*use of alcohol is one of the world’s leading health risks.*”

(i) *It is a causal factor in more than 60 major types of diseases and injuries and results in approximately 2.5 million deaths each year.*

(ii) *If we take into consideration the beneficial impact of low risk alcohol use on morbidity and mortality in some diseases and in some population groups, the total number of deaths attributable to alcohol consumption was estimated to be 2.25 million in 2004.*

- *This accounts for more deaths than caused by HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis.*
- *Thus, 4% of all deaths worldwide are attributable to alcohol.*
- *The harmful use of alcohol is especially fatal for younger age groups and alcohol is the world’s leading risk factor for death among males.*

(iii) *Approximately 4.5% of the global burden of disease and injury is attributable to alcohol.*

- *Alcohol consumption is estimated to cause from 20% to 50% of cirrhosis of the liver, epilepsy, poisonings, road traffic accidents, violence and several types of cancer.*
- *It is the third highest risk for disease and disability, after childhood underweight and unsafe sex.*
- *Alcohol contributes to traumatic outcomes that kill or disable people at a relatively young age, resulting in the loss of many years of life to death and disability.*
- *Alcohol ranks eighth among global risk factors for death, while it is the third leading global risk factor for disease and disability¹¹*

(c) What about supposed health benefits?

(i) There is still debate over whether it is the alcohol or a substance in the skin of the grape that has the beneficial effect.

(ii) Doctors admit that the cadavers of drunks have clean arteries, but they have diseased livers! (Like shooting yourself in the foot to cure an ingrown toenail: it works, but it does more harm than good!!)

D) These are true real life consequences of drinking. Many of them have spiritual implications, and that is our concern. What does God say about drinking alcohol?

III) Social Drinking: The Wide Gate to the Sin of Drunkenness

A) As a work of the flesh, drunkenness is a sin that will keep those guilty of it out of heaven (Gal. 5:21, 1 Cor. 6:11).

B) Problem drinking is a problem in America. According to a 2015 report in *JAMA Psychiatry*, “*Researchers from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism asked 36,000 adults during 2012 or 2013 about their drinking habits, both currently and within the past year. About 14 percent of adults, or nearly 33 million nationally, were current or recent problem drinkers, the researchers found. Thirty percent — almost 69 million — had been problem drinkers at some point in their lives.*”

- C) Axiom: Every person who has ever gotten drunk started by drinking a little
 - 1) **Becoming intoxicated is a process.**
 - 2) When in the process of intoxication does it become sinful?
- D) Even righteous people with extraordinary conviction and self-control can be ensnared!
 - 1) Ask righteous Lot (2 Peter 2:8), whose daughters gave him wine, got him drunk, and became pregnant by him (Gen. 19:30-36)
 - 2) Ask Noah, whose nakedness was uncovered (Gen. 9:21).
 - 3) Ask millions whose lives have been damaged or destroyed by poor choices they made while under the influence of alcohol!
 - 4) Social drinkers who boast that their own self-control, goodness and determination will enable them to avoid the sin of drunkenness are self-deceived.
- E) Jesus commanded us to pray, “Lead us not into temptation” (Matt. 6:13). Is it possible for a person to sincerely pray that prayer and be a social drinker, realizing that drinking has LED every drunk who ever got drunk to commit the sin of drunkenness?

IV) Social drinking and self-control.

- A) Christians are to add to their knowledge “self-control” (2 Peter 1:6).
 - 1) Thayer defines the Greek word *egkrateia* (Gr. ε γκράτεια) as "the virtue of one who masters his desires and passions, esp. his sensual appetites" (Thayer, 167).
 - 2) A bishop must be “self-controlled” (Titus 1:8; Gr. ε γκρατής). “Having power over...mastering, controlling, curbing, restraining" (Thayer, 167).
- B) Alcohol takes away self-control!
 - 1) You don't need to drink much alcohol before your ability to drive becomes impaired.
 - 2) For example, certain driving skills--such as steering a car while, at the same time, responding to changes in traffic--can be impaired by blood alcohol concentrations (BAC) as low as 0.02 percent.
 - 3) A 160-pound man will have a BAC of about 0.04 percent 1 hour after consuming two 12-ounce beers or two other standard drinks on an empty stomach.
 - 4) Although most States set the BAC limit for adults who drive after drinking at 0.08 to 0.10 percent, it is known that impairment of driving skills begins at much lower levels.
- C) When does your impairment in praying skills or parenting skills occur? When do you begin to lose self-control and make unrighteous choices?

V) What's Stronger than “Strong Drink?”

- A) The Hebrew word “shekar” (Heb. כר ש) is typically translated “strong drink” or “intoxicating drink” in English translations of the Old Testament.
 - 1) Brown, Driver & Briggs define “shekar” as “strong drink, intoxicating drink, fermented or intoxicating liquor.”
 - 2) Strong's dictionary says that “shekar” is “an *intoxicant*, that is, intensely alcoholic *liquor*: - strong drink.”

- 3) According to Hebrew scholar Bruce Waltke, “Strong drink denotes any inebriating drink with about 7–10 percent alcoholic content, not hard liquor, because there is no evidence of distilled liquor in ancient times¹²
 - 4) "Strong drink" is consistently condemned in the Bible, other than in for the purposes of a tithe offering or as medicine.¹³
- B) Many modern alcoholic beverages are much stronger than the “strong drink” warned against throughout the Old Testament.
- 1) Modern wines often undergo two processes to increase alcohol content.
 - (a) *Chaptalization* is a process perfected by a French chemist named Jean Antoine Chaptal around 1800 in which sugar is added during the fermenting process.
 - (b) *Fortification* involves alcohol being added to the wine after the fermentation process.
 - 2) The beers and wines of our day are as strong or stronger than Biblical “strong drink.”
 - (a) Western wine has alcohol content of 8% - 15%, with some wines having as high as 22% (e.g. Zinfandels).
 - (b) Popular beers are usually in the 4% to 6% range, although a few are considerably higher.
 - (c) Hard liquor (whiskey, tequila, vodka, rum) have 40-50% alcohol, and bourbon can have nearly 80% alcohol!¹⁴
 - (d) Thus virtually every sort of alcoholic beverage sold on the market today would qualify as “strong drink” in Bible times, and most would have to be classified as stronger than strong!
 - 3) Comparing social drinking today in America to the drinking done in Bible times with meals is an uneven comparison at best. It’s not like comparing apples and oranges. It is comparing cider to whiskey, and it is comparing a relatively safe food with a powerful and harmful drug.
 - 4) Paul Earnhart addresses these points as follows:

The ancient world knew nothing of distillation, of the modern alcoholic drinks that are 40-50% alcohol. Their wines were a maximum of 14% alcohol and Palestinian wines no more than 8%. Unless diluted with three or more parts of water, even pagans considered them strong drink to be avoided. The purpose of that dilution was to make the wine a harmless non-intoxicating table food. By these standards every modern alcoholic beverage from beer to whiskey is strong drink. Christians should avoid all of them. Surely the Bible’s demand for sobriety must be more stringent than that of ancient paganism.

But what about carefully diluted wine as a table drink today? The problem for the Christian in America is that we have no tradition of wine as a table food. Since the beginning, alcohol has been used as a drug, a “feel good” beverage, and the use of the most innocent non-intoxicating wine would likely be perceived that way by others. We’re living in a drugged society where God’s child must walk circumspectly, neither bringing an occasion of stumbling to others (Romans 14:21) or shutting hearts against the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Better it is by far that we avoid even the most diluted form of beverage alcohol so that our “good” may not “be evil spoken of” (Romans 14:16) and Christ may be exalted.¹⁵

Conclusion -- Two phone calls.

In mid-September of 2015, I received a phone call from a young man out in Texas. The leadership of the church (non-institutional) where he is attending had recently made a statement to the congregation that, while none of them drinks alcohol, they cannot condemn the drinking of alcohol in moderation. The young man was very concerned that this public declaration would, in effect, give the entire congregation the green light to engage in social drinking.

It is wrong to bind where the Lord has not bound. But it is also wrong to put an occasion of stumbling or temptation in the way of another (Luke 17:1-2).

On March 8, 2015, I received a phone call from a young man in jail in Texas. He called me from the county jail after having been shot during a domestic altercation with his girlfriend which occurred after both had been drinking. He later told me that he wanted to stop drinking because he realized that it removes his inhibitions and self-control. I knew this young man well. He had been taught that drinking was wrong from his youth; his parents did not drink, and he was never around social drinkers growing up. But, not long after leaving home as a young adult, he was told by a preacher in a private study that it was ok to drink. About this time, he began buying beer and drinking at home. After a while, he began to drink with buddies socially after work. Eventually he would say that he would occasionally get “buzzed” but not drunk (although the two are legally the same). His drinking was without doubt a major factor in leading him to become involved in sexual immorality – engaging in the worst kinds of marital unfaithfulness, and ultimately losing his family to divorce. This young man is in a state of spiritual confusion. He has questioned his faith in the Bible as God’s word. I fear for the preacher who told him that it was ok for him to have a drink. The statement of the leadership of that church out in Texas will have the same effect on many young people. I fear for them. But I fear most of all for the soul of that young man who called me from jail, and for whom I have prayed many prayers and cried many tears, because, you see, he is my son.

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ENDNOTES

¹ “Alcohol,” Legal-dictionary. thefreedictionary.com

² The position that brother Earnhart takes in this article is as follows: “It may well be that the positive biblical references to wine are speaking simply of the juice of the grape. But another important distinction needs to be observed as well. The Bible treats wine in two ways, as a drug or social drink (bad), as a food or table drink (good). Some have suggested that the only difference between the two is in the amount one drinks and not in the nature of the beverage. The extra-biblical evidence does not point that way. The wine used as a table drink in the ancient world was not pure wine, but was liberally diluted with water. It was a family food, not a social beverage.” Paul Earnhart. (1990). Biblical Wine: Blessing or Curse, *Christianity Magazine*, 7 (5), 27.

³ Alcoholrehab.com <http://alcoholrehab.com/alcoholism/social-drinking-defined/>

⁴ *Synonyms of the New Testament*, p. 211.

⁵ MADD (Mothers Against Drunk Driving) web site, <http://www.madd.org>

⁶ Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Alcohol and crime*. <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ac.pdf>

⁷ National Institutes of Health. *Alcohol consumption and divorce rates in the United States*. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10487734>

⁸ The Academy of Management, *Does Drinking Alcohol Affect Employment Status?* <http://www.amog.com/drinking-alcohol-affect-employment-status/>

⁹ National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, *Alcohol and the Workplace*. <https://ncadd.org/learn-about-alcohol/workplace/204-workplace>

¹⁰ National Institutes of Health (NIH) web sites, including the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

¹¹ World Health Organization, *Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health*, http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/global_alcohol_report/msbgsrupfiles.pdf

¹² Bruce Waltke (2005). *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31. New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. NOTE: Waltke is an eminent Hebrew scholar whose works include an *Intermediate Hebrew Grammar AND Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*.

¹³ "Strong drink" is consistently condemned in the Bible, other than in Deuteronomy 14:26 and Proverbs 31:6 for the purpose of offering or medicine. The other references are as follows:

- Leviticus 10:9 – priests were not to drink wine or intoxicating drink when on duty [When is a Christian not on duty as a priest?]
- Numbers 6:3 – Nazirite to separate himself from wine and strong drink
- Judges 13:4, 7, 14 – requires this of Samson’s mother and Samson
- Numbers 28:7 – an offering poured out before the Lord
- Deuteronomy 29:6 – Israel did not drink in wilderness
- 1 Samuel 1:15 – Hannah was not drunk with wine or intoxicating drink.
- Psalm 69:2 – refers to the “song of drunkards” i.e. those who drink intoxicating drink.
- Proverbs 20:1 -- Wine is a mocker, Strong drink is a brawler, And whoever is led astray by it is not wise.
- Proverbs 31:4-6 – not good for kings or princes, lest they pervert justice.
- Isaiah 5:11 – “Woe to those who rise early in the morning, That they may follow intoxicating drink
- Isaiah 5:22 Woe to men mighty at drinking wine, Woe to men valiant for mixing intoxicating drink
- Isaiah 24:29 – God will curse the land so that “Strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.”
- Isaiah 28:7 – “But they also have erred through wine, And through intoxicating drink are out of the way; The priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink, They are swallowed up by wine, They are out of the way through intoxicating drink; They err in vision, they stumble in judgment”
- Isaiah 56:12 – the blind watchmen and worthless shepherds of God’s people say, “Come," one says, "I will bring wine, And we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; Tomorrow will be as today, And much more abundant."

¹⁴ Alcohol Content Database, <http://www.alcoholcontents.com>

¹⁵ Earnhart, op. cit.