

Is Drunkenness All That The Bible Condemns About Drinking?

By Kyle Pope

It is not uncommon to hear the assertion made from time to time that all the Bible condemns about the drinking of alcohol is drunkenness. If this is true (so it is argued) a Christian can drink alcoholic beverages within moderation without sinning. While many Christians have come to believe this, it is a flawed interpretation of Scripture. The Bible clearly teaches that drunkenness is not the only aspect of drinking that is condemned. When all of Scripture is taken into consideration it becomes evident that Christians should abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages altogether.

There are many factors that lead to this conclusion that we could address. Among these are...

A. A Christian's influence. When non-Christians (or Christians tempted by this sin) see us using alcoholic beverages our influence is compromised. They might follow our example and become ensnared by something that enslaves them to the bottle.

B. Watchfulness. As Christians we are to be on guard, watching for opportunities for good, the dangers of temptation, and the coming of Christ. Alcoholic beverages in even the smallest measure hinder keen watchfulness.

C. The sanctification of Christians. Christians are "saints" set apart unto God. As those who serve God and represent His word to the world we are called upon to maintain a higher more noble and controlled standard of conduct. Alcoholic beverages appeal to the baser impulses of humanity and do not help us maintain this sanctification.

D. Factors regarding ancient drink. While the Bible speaks of both Christians and non-Christians drinking what is called "wine" it is a mistake to conclude that every reference to wine describes what our world calls "wine" as distinct from non-intoxicating products of the vine. There is abundant biblical and historical evidence that many in ancient times preserved grape juice in order to avoid fermentation or watered it down to prevent its intoxicating effects.

Three Words on Drinking

While these are important considerations what we will do in this study is focus on three words that are used in Scripture that make it clear that Christians should not drink alcoholic beverages at all. We will consider two words that describe the kind of things Christians must put off in coming to Christ, and one word that describes the kind of behavior we should adopt. From this study we will see that drunkenness is only the most extreme aspect of drinking that is condemned.

Two things a Christian must avoid.

A pivotal passage in this discussion is 1 Peter 4:1-3. In this text the apostle urges us to "arm" ourselves with a Christ-like mind in resisting sin (vs. 1). We are told how we should spend the rest of the time "in the flesh." While we have physical bodies we no longer live according to the "lusts of men" but for the will of God (vs. 2). The apostle tells us "we have spent enough of our past lifetime" in certain behavior. Just as a father might scold a child saying "that's enough!" the idea is clearly *don't do it anymore!* In this list of things that have occupied "enough" of our past

lifetime, there are three important terms which all relate to drinking—“drunkenness, revelries” and “drinking parties” (vs. 3). The first word refers to literally “bubbling up” with wine. A clear allusion to intoxication. The other two are different.

“Revelries.” The word used here is found in two other places in the New Testament. In Galatians 5:21 it is listed among those things which disqualify a person from the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. In Romans 13:13 it describes improper behavior done under the cover of night. The word translated “revelries” is the Greek word *komos* (kōmow) meaning, “a *revel, carousal*, i.e. in the Greek writers properly a nocturnal and riotous procession of half-drunken and frolicsome fellows who after supper parade through the streets with torches and music in honor of Bacchus [i.e. the god of wine] or some other deity” (Thayer, 367).

This word has a significant history in Greek literature. In Herodotus it was used of celebration. The phrase “to make the *komos*” was equivalent with celebration (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.21.2). In Euripides, Herakles is rebuked by a servant when he unfittingly engaged in laughter and the *komos* when the household was mourning the death of the woman of the house (Euripides, *Alcestis* 804). A *komos* could be night long, as in Euripides’ *Helen*, where it involved music and dancing in honor of the legendary figure Hyakinthos (1469-1470). Pindar used it of a victory procession in the Pythian games (*Pythian* 5, 22). Hesiod used the verb form of a wedding procession (*Shield of Herakles*, 281).

From such descriptions it is evident exactly what Peter is talking about in 1 Peter 4:3. This isn’t the kind of thing where one is so affected that he can’t walk—this is the wild celebration. It is the wedding reception where Champaign is served. It is the ball game where beer is passed around. It is the Mardi Gras parade where drink has lowered inhibitions. It is not total drunkenness but it is wrong.

“Drinking Parties.” The third term which Peter uses is found nowhere else in the New Testament. In the Greek Old Testament it was used a number of times. In some instances it was used for the Hebrew word the New King James translates “banquet” (Est. 6:14; Dan. 5:10 “{house of the} banquet;” Est. 5:6 “banquet of wine.”) In some cases it is used of “feasting” (Jer. 16:8 “{house of} feasting;” Job 1:4, 5; Est. 1:5,2:18; 1 Kings 3:5; 2 Sam. 3:20; 1 Sam. 25:36 with drunkenness; Judges 14:10,12,17; Gen. 19:3; 40:20 of Pharaoh’s birthday). The primary meaning is illustrated from Esther 1:5-8 which describes a feast where drinking was (uncustomarily) not compulsory.

The word translated “drinking parties” is the Greek word *potos* (pōtow) meaning simply “a *drinking or a carousing*” (Thayer, 533). This word is equivalent to the Greek Symposium—a drinking party that goes on after a meal that can involve either a long period of compulsory drink leading to drunkenness and fornication or (if it is agreed upon) simply drinking and discussion. In Plato’s dialogue entitled the *Symposium* it is agreed not to push the drinking to the point of drunkenness, but to let each drink as he chooses. In this text one of those participating in this drinking party even gives a discourse in which he condemns drunkenness. This shows clearly that although he was participating in a *potos* it was not the equivalent of drunkenness (176a-e).

From such descriptions we can know exactly what this kind of thing is also. It is that after work cocktail with our boss, or a prospective client. It is that backyard barbeque with a few friends. It is that drink with a meal to “unwind.” It’s not drunkenness, but the Holy Spirit says “that’s enough”—Christians can’t act that way anymore.

Something a Christian Must Be

There is one last word to consider which makes it clear that drunkenness is not the only thing the Bible condemns about drinking. A Christian must be...

“Temperate.” There are a couple of words that are translated “temperate” but we will consider only one in this study. In three instances we find in the New Testament the Greek word *nephaleos* meaning, “sober, temperate, abstaining from wine...” (Thayer, 425). Twice it is translated “temperate,” in the qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:2) and elders’ and deacons’ wives (1 Tim. 3:11) and once it is translated “sober” in describing the character of older men (Titus 2:2). Even though these passages are directed to three specific groups, if elders are to be examples (1 Peter 5:3) it only follows that the character that is taught regarding elders, older men, and elders’ and deacon’s wives should be true of all Christians.

The word *nephaleos* is found in a number of Attic inscriptions. It is used to denote wineless altars and offerings (*Introduction to Greek Epigraphy*, E. S. Roberts & E. A. Gardner. Cambridge: University Press, 1905 - Vol. II, pp.379-380; 387-388). The Alexandrian Jew Philo used the word in reference to the manner in which the priests were to go before the altar. In reference to Leviticus 10:9-10 he suggests they even abstained from any medicine that might impair their judgment or self-control (*Special Laws* 1.100; 4.191). The First century Jewish historian Josephus echoed the same use of the word. In his *Antiquities of the Jews* he used the word of priests also claiming that they keep themselves “pure and *nephaleos* concerning all things, not drinking wine while they wear the priestly garment” (3.12.2).

The Bible teaches that all Christians are priests offering up spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10). If we consider the use of *nephaleos* in light of the fact that Christians are priests, we find that the Holy Spirit used a word that in ancient times was used of wineless offerings and the purity of the priests when they offered sacrifice. There can be no question that the Lord is commanding us to have this same purity as living sacrifices and a holy priesthood abstaining from alcoholic drink altogether.

Conclusion. We have seen clearly that the Bible condemns more than just drunkenness with respect to the use of alcoholic beverages. Christians are called upon to maintain a vigilant sobriety in our service to the Lord as we stay on guard for the dangers that could beset us as well as those that could overtake others.

On New Year’s Eve in New York’s Time Square something took place on December 31, 2001 that I had never seen before in my life. Alcohol was banned! That is the “party-place”—they always let go! Why the change? September 11, 2001 made New York and all the world realize that there are dangers that are so threatening that even when we enjoy ourselves we must stay on guard. For a Christian that is not new information. From the spiritual cradle of baptism until the glorious departure of our souls from our physical bodies the Christian faces foes that could threaten our salvation. We must be just as watchful as we guard against such dangers.

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