

Social Drinking—*It's Ok, Right?*

By Kyle Pope

The saying, “Time changes all things,” certainly describes attitudes in religion. Once most religious people in America shunned alcohol. Now even brethren may argue that social drinking is acceptable. What should a Christian’s attitude be toward drinking alcohol? To answer this let’s consider a few questions:

1. What Does the Bible Condemn? Many answer that drunkenness is all that’s condemned. If that’s your answer I challenge you to look at 1 Peter 4:3 – “For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.” Although it’s not as apparent in English, the phrases “drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties,” all refer to types of drinking. All are condemned, but all do not involve drunkenness. This tells Christians to reject the extreme of drunkenness, and other types of drinking which don’t involve drunkenness.¹

2. What Does the Bible Command? Scripture commands elders (1 Tim. 3:2) and others (1 Tim. 3:11; Titus 2:2) to be “temperate.” This word translates the Greek *nephaleos*, meaning, “sober, temperate, abstaining from wine” (Thayer). The Greeks used this of wineless offerings. The Jews used it of abstinence from drink practiced by priest during their service (Lev. 10:9-10). If elders are “examples” to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3), and Christians are priests serving God at all times (1 Pet. 2:4-5), then Scripture is commanding Christians to practice abstinence from intoxicating drink.

3. But, Didn’t Jesus and the Disciples Drink? My wife’s grandfather used to talk about “cider.” By this he meant: 1) freshly pressed “juice” (i. e. “apple cider”), 2) juice that had fermented (i. e. “hard cider”), and even 3) apple cider vinegar. This parallels scriptural references to “wine.” There were, “all sorts of wine” (Neh. 5:18). There was “new wine” (Hos. 4:11), “sour wine” (Matt. 27:34), “red wine” (Is. 27:2), “sweet wine” (Is. 49:26), wine mixed with milk (So. 5:1), water (Is. 1:22), spices (So. 8:2), and myrrh (Mark 15:23). Words for wine apply to juice in the cluster (Is. 65:8), in the press (Is. 16:10), during fermentation (Prov. 23:31), and for medicinal use (1 Tim. 5:23). Bible “wine” refers to liquid from grapes at all stages from grape juice to vinegar.

Fermentation of Grapes

How does fermentation work? Grapes produce sugars which ferment under the right conditions. These sugars must have contact with yeast. Grapes have natural “ambient yeast” inside and on the skin. This yeast turns sugar to alcohol. The amount of sugar and yeast varies based on climate, rainfall, and temperature. The lower the amount the lower the alcohol content. To regulate this, some winemakers add yeast (and even sugar) to affect the taste and strength of wine.

¹ To look closer at this text and the Gr. *nephaleos* see my study, “Is Drunkenness All the Bible Condemns About Drinking Alcohol?” *Truth Magazine* October 16, 2003 (18-20).

Can Fermentation Be Prevented?

Today we go to the store and purchase “grape juice” sold by Welch’s. Since 1869 with Thomas Bramwell Welch’s discovery of methods to pasteurize grape juice, unfermented grape “wine” is available in any grocery store. Heat pasteurization kills yeast cultures, impeding fermentation. If ambient yeast in the air is withheld, the juice remains unfermented. This doesn’t mean that juice could not be preserved before 1869. Methods to impede fermentation or prevent intoxication have existed for millennia. A few of these included:

Boiling: When freshly pressed grape juice is boiled, water evaporates leaving thick syrup that doesn’t ferment as easily and can be diluted later. The Mishneh records debates among Jews about whether boiled or unboiled wine was used in the heave-offering (*Terumot* 11:1).² Aristotle wrote about wines in Arcadia so thick they were scraped off the wineskins to drink (*Meteorologica* 388b, 6). Virgil described housewives boiling down “sweet must (i.e. freshly squeezed grape juice)” (*Georgics*, 1.295).

Filtration: Since ambient yeast is in the solid matter of grapes, part of what allows fermentation is contact with the skin, stems, and seeds of grapes. If pressed juice is filtered at an early stage, most yeast can be removed. One winemaking forum online claims that a .45 micron filter removes most yeasts.³ Now ancients didn’t have refined filters, but it’s clear that filtration was used. Pliny the Elder wrote that the most suitable for all men was wine, “with strength reduced by the filter,” even explaining the difference between “must” and fermented wine (*Natural History*, 23.24). Plutarch devotes an entire discussion to whether wine should be strained, declaring wine “cleansed” by a strainer, has its “strike and madness taken away” leaving one in a “mild and healthy state of mind” (*Symposiacs*, 693b 3-5). The Talmud records debates regarding whether wine should be filtered on the Sabbath or not (*Shabbat*, 139b).⁴ Isaiah 25:6 probably describes filtered wine in its reference to a feast of “wines on the lees well-refined.” The word for “well-refined” means, “to purify, distil, strain, refine” (Gesenius).⁵ Boiled or filtered wines could be sealed and stored in cellars for long periods of time.

Dilution: A common technique to guard against intoxication was diluting wine with water. This was as much as 20/1 (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.208), 8/1 (Pliny *Natural History* 14.6), or among the Jews 2 or 3/1 (*Shabbat* 77a; *Pesachim* 108b). The apocryphal book of 2 Maccabbes claims, “It is hurtful to drink wine or water alone... wine mingled with water is pleasant” (15:39).

So what did Jesus and the disciples drink? Let’s ask this—how would godly people, before the FDA, product labeling, and modern chemistry determine what they drank? They went to the market or winepress, and chose based on taste, smell, and appearance. If juice was fresh,

² Another discussion on boiled wine is in Talmudic tract ‘*Abadah Zarah* 30a-b.

³ <http://www.drinksplanet.com/is-it-possible-to-stop-fermentation-1521710.html> [March 3, 2010].

⁴ The Talmudic tract *Terumot* also mentions the “wine filter” (8.6).

⁵ In modern winemaking “lees” refers to sediment from dead yeast cells after fermentation. Yet, both Plutarch and Talmudic sources call “lees” the residue from initial pressing and later stages. Plutarch even writes that filtering lees prevented intoxication (*Symposiacs*, 692c 9-10).

they drank it or preserved it by boiling or filtering. If it wasn't, they would purchase drink which would not impair their sobriety (and probably dilute it to prevent any possible intoxicating effects). There is no question that the Bible refers to "wine" that was alcoholic. However it is a grave mistake to see in every reference to "wine" the alcoholic drink we find in modern liquor stores. That is not what Jesus drank, nor would He approve of those who do today.

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