

Alcohol and Wisdom

Doy Moyer

Introduction

“The ordinary table beverage of the Mediterranean world in Roman times was wine mixed with water. This information, well known to Classicists, has not found its way into much literature dealing with the Bible, and so is not so well known in religious circles” (Everett Ferguson, *Wine as a Table-Drink in the Ancient World*, *Restoration Quarterly*, 13:3, 1970, pp. 141-153).

While there is probably more knowledge of this now, it is something we might need reminding of when we start to make practical decisions about this issue today, for it will always be a mistake to take the term “wine” in our English Bibles and bring it across the board to our modern concepts of wine and alcohol.

God teaches us to think not just in terms of technical do’s and don’ts, but in terms of wisdom and discernment (Prov. 2:1-6; Heb. 5:14). Therefore, before engaging in activities, we shouldn’t just ask, “Is this specifically allowed or condemned?” Rather we ought to ask, “Does this reflect the wisdom from above or the wisdom of the world?” Even more, ask, “Will this glorify God or self?”

The question I am asking is whether or not we would want to affirm the following: “The wise and good thing to do today is to start drinking alcohol.” This is not a trick statement, and perhaps it can be worded better. The point, though, should be clear. Do we think it is wise to start drinking alcohol today? I specifically put the word “today” in here because there are differences between today and the ancient context that ought to be considered.

Maybe that sounds too stacked, framed in a way that brings an obvious answer. Maybe, but it gets to the heart of what I’m wanting to discuss.

For the sake of clarification, here are some particular points that this lesson is not meant to address in any detail, even if mentioned in passing:

- A. Whether or not Scripture condemns all drinking (not just drunkenness).
- B. Whether or not there are passages that speak of some fermented drinks in a

more positive light.

- C. Whether or not Jesus made water into wine that could get people drunk.
- D. Whether issues like gluttony carry the same weight as modern alcohol consumption.
- E. Whether or not someone is going to hell for allowing alcohol to touch the lips at all.

Rather, what we are talking about here is applying wisdom to the issue for today. Other studies deal with the other issues.

In our consideration of the issue today, we must consider differences between then and now. We must look at the issue of discernment and wisdom at a time when the problem of alcoholism continues to plague millions. Are we sure the prime reasons for drinking then are identical to now? Are we so certain about it that we will promote modern drinking at the risk of influencing another in a way that could well result in severe consequences? Are we aware of what those risks are?

Remember that holiness and sobriety go hand in hand (1 Peter 1:13-16). Think wisdom. Be discerning.

As a parent, would you tell your child, “You know, I believe it is okay to drink alcohol, that the Bible doesn’t really condemn it, so let me give you this wise advice: drink! Go ahead. Don’t overdo it, but you really should start drinking some. It will be good for you.”?

I. Let’s get some perspective on the problem. This will help us gain a little appreciation for the fact that the problem of alcohol use today is at levels that the ancient world couldn’t imagine.

A. Wisdom requires an understanding of the times in which we live.

1. Ecc. 7:10 implies that wisdom requires understanding of the present rather than just focusing on the past.

2. 1 Chron. 12:32 speaks of “the sons of Issachar, men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do...”

3. Understanding the age in which we live is vital to our spiritual success. This is especially so when it concerns particular temptations, sins, and problems that arise from these that the ancient world would not have known. Compare pornography as an example between then and now.

B. The following statistical information comes from various websites dealing with the problem of alcohol abuse. The first few quotes come from the Centers for Disease

Control, and helps put in perspective the modern problems associated with alcohol use:

1. More than 16 million people over 18 years old had some form of alcohol use disorder in 2013. In that same year, from ages 12-17, nearly 700,000 had some form of alcohol use disorder. Ages 12-17 – let that sink in.

2. Under the category of drinking “too much,” the CDC says that “excessive alcohol use led to approximately 88,000 deaths” each year in the United States from 2006-2010. Excessive drinking was responsible for 1 in 10 deaths among working-age adults aged 20-64 years, and “most people who drink excessively are not alcoholics or alcohol dependent.” They further list a number of risks associated with drinking. What intrigues me is that they list “some persons who should not drink any alcohol,” and among them include those who will be “participating in other activities requiring skill, coordination, and alertness.” Alertness? Does that ring a bell?

3. Over 10,000 alcohol-related deaths occurred in automobile accidents in 2013 alone. Within this very hour, at least one or more will die due to alcoholic-related driving. I’ve wondered how many ancient highway deaths were caused by drunk chariot drivers. Really, are the circumstances from then to now across the board, or are there some significant differences that should factor into our decisions about this today? Alcohol misuse problems cost billions of dollars every years. Billions. Many of the problems are due to binge drinking. All it takes is that one time.

4. In 2012, over 3 million deaths globally were attributed to alcohol consumption. Alcohol contributes to over 200 diseases. Globally, alcohol misuse is the fifth leading factor in premature death or disability; among those aged 15-49, it is first. First!

5. Each year, some 1,800 plus college students die from alcohol-related incidents (including vehicle crashes). Nearly 700,000 students between 18-24 were assaulted by another student who had been drinking. Nearly 100,000 report alcohol-related sexual assault or date rape. About 20 percent of college students meet the criteria for alcohol use disorder. Shall we go on? (See www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics for more).

6. Then, from the NY Times: “According to the U.S. National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, about 70% of American adults always drink at low-risk levels or do not drink at all. (Thirty-five percent of Americans do not consume alcohol.) About 28% of American adults drink at levels that put them at risk for alcohol dependence and alcohol-related problems.”
(<http://www.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/alcoholism/risk-factors.html>)

7. “*Drinking in Adolescence*. About half of under-age Americans have used alcohol. About 2 million people ages 12 - 20 are considered heavy drinkers, and 4.4 million are binge drinkers. Anyone who begins drinking in adolescence is at risk for developing

alcoholism. The earlier a person begins drinking, the greater the risk. A survey of over 40,000 adults indicated that among those who began drinking before age 14, nearly half had become alcoholic dependent by the age of 21. In contrast, only 9% of people who began drinking after the age of 21 developed alcoholism. Young people at highest risk for early drinking are those with a history of abuse, family violence, depression, and stressful life events. People with a family history of alcoholism are also more likely to begin drinking before the age of 20 and to become alcoholic. Such adolescent drinkers are also more apt to underestimate the effects of drinking and to make judgment errors, such as going on binges or driving after drinking, than young drinkers without a family history of alcoholism.” (<http://www.nytimes.com/health/guides/disease/alcoholism/risk-factors.html>)

8. “Alcoholism statistics from the *National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism* show that the age of a person’s first alcoholic drink may determine their likelihood in becoming an alcoholic. It has been found that those who had their first alcoholic drink before they were 15 were much more likely to have a problem with alcohol later in life than those who abstained until a later age. Information from the *World Health Organization* shows that there are an estimated 140 million alcoholics around the world!” (<http://www.alcoholaddiction.info/alcoholism-statistics.htm>)

9. From a website on “Understanding Addiction”:

a. “Alcoholism is an extremely serious problem in our world today, meaning that public knowledge and understanding of its symptoms and effects is highly important to reduce the statistics that show rising numbers in its causal injuries, diseases, and fatalities.”

b. “In the United States, nearly 14 million adults, or every one in 13 adults, abuse alcohol or have an alcoholism problem. In addition, several million more partake in risky alcohol consumption that could potentially lead to abuse, and over three million American teenagers aged 14 to 17 have an alcohol problem.” (<http://www.projectknow.com/research/drug-addiction-statistics-alcoholism-statistics/>)

C. Can we not think of this as a category of wisdom and discernment for the child of God today? Question: given that we don’t know who may or may not become an alcoholic, and if 1 in 13 becomes an alcoholic, do you want to be the one who introduced alcohol to that person? Will you introduce alcohol to enough people, or will you influence enough people in your defense of alcohol, that one of them becomes an abuser? Are you willing to take that risk? Is that worth it?

D. This isn’t a matter of having little choice in drink, of needing to dilute the water, or of drinking naturally fermented juices that are diluted. Alcoholism is devastating, and there are far too many cases of it not to be prepared to deal with the effects of it. If you will promote taking that first drink to enough people today, will you be prepared to deal

with what may well happen to some of them? Shall we bury our heads and think, “oh that won’t happen to my family”? Tell that to all the families it has happened to.

E. Looking at the question from a strict “where does the Bible specifically condemn or allow it” perspective completely overlooks the wisdom question for today’s world. We live in a world today that is very different from the ancient world, and the kinds of stats given show an abuse problem, an alcoholism problem that we cannot ignore in today’s climate. Today, it isn’t necessary at all. Today, the consequences are far more reaching and costly than ever before. Is it the wise thing to do for our times today, given the problems associated with it now?

F. Without contradiction, we may say that no non-drinker becomes a problem drinker. Perhaps this is extreme. Perhaps this is over-reacting to potential problems, but without question it is safe, it supports self-control and holiness, and it will never influence another to go down a path that everyone involved may well regret. Dare we ignore the problem for the sake of a perceived right?

II. The Need for Sobriety.

A. When we consider the question of whether or not we ought to be drinking today, we may immediately recall several passages:

1. “Therefore **be on the alert**, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt 24:42).
2. “Therefore **be on the alert...**” (Acts 20:31)
3. “**Be on the alert**, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong” (1 Cor 16:13).
4. “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, **be on the alert** with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).
5. “So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us **be alert and sober**” (1 Thess 5:6). “But since we are of the day, let us **be sober**” (vs. 8).
6. “Therefore, prepare your minds for action, **keep sober** in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13).
7. “The end of all things is near; therefore, **be of sound judgment and sober spirit** for the purpose of prayer” (1 Peter 4:7).
8. “**Be of sober spirit, be on the alert.** Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).
9. “But you, **be sober in all things**, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5).
10. “Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord

Jesus Christ, and **make no provision** for the flesh in regard to its lusts” (Rom. 13:13-14).

B. “Sober” (νήφω, *nepho*) means “to abstain from wine” (Strong’s), or “denotes primarily abstinence from wine” (Archea and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on the First Letter from Peter*). “To drink no wine” (Liddell and Scott). This is opposed to engaging in that which takes away our full attention.

1. Of course, the idea is more than just “not getting drunk,” and many will argue that the term is meant metaphorically. One may say it means “sobriety” in a figurative sense, but how can one be sober figuratively if not also literally? The term indicates self-control, the need to keep our heads clear in all situations, to keep away from that which dulls our minds and keeps us from focusing on our hope or making us unable to concentrate on our service. While more than just alcohol may be involved, we surely cannot dismiss alcohol from these passages as that which will keep us from being sober. Isn’t it interesting that the apostles used this term in order to make this point? Does that tell us something? Is there not a correlation here? Without question, the loss of self-control is in proportion to an increased use of alcohol or other intoxicants.

2. Should any of this factor into decisions about whether Christians ought to be drinking? Remember, even the CDC recommends that people who require *alertness* should not be drinking, so let’s ask again: what is the wise and discerning choice to make today? I realize that I’ve already pushed the direction of the answer, but there are reasons for this.

C. Most Christians will recognize the difficulties in Scripture over the subject of drinking alcohol. On the one hand, there are passages that speak of “wine” in positive terms (Psalm 104:15; Ecc 10:19). On the other hand, the warnings against strong drink, and especially drunkenness, are clear and unequivocal (Prov 20:1; 21:17; 23:30-31). Drunkenness will keep one out of the kingdom of heaven (Gal 5:21). Drinking parties and the like are among the lusts of men from which Christians are to refrain (1 Pet 4:1-4). Peter speaks of Christians being different enough in this respect that the world thinks it strange that we don’t do what they do. The New Testament emphasis, again, is on the mind that is sober, alert, and able to make godly, sound decisions, so beware of anything that runs counter to that. The idea should never be that we get as close to the line as possible. The Christian should not be content with lurking around in areas that are in question.

D. There is much to say about all of the “wine” passages. In my experience, I have found more and more pushback against the idea of teaching abstinence. The debate today is not usually whether people in biblical times drank something that could have, in excess, gotten them drunk. Even if we grant this, does that necessarily mean that Christians have God’s blessing to, or should, engage in “social” or “moderate” drinking today. We are not discussing medical usage. We are discussing drinking of intoxicating alcohol for non-medical and recreational reasons.

1. I don't expect this debate to go away any time soon, but, again, the purpose here is to consider the issue from a wisdom perspective. What will godly wisdom teach us about choices we make in our modern world relative to drinking alcohol? One thing we can all agree on is this: drunkenness is sinful and will destroy a soul.

2. I find it interesting that to question its use today due to a number of modern factors, leads some people to:

a. Repeat all the Bible verses indicating that wine is good. Yes, we know those passages are there.

b. Point out that people could have gotten drunk back then. Does anyone really dispute that?

c. Keep repeating the two above points as if we were completely unaware of these things.

3. Just pointing to the passages and saying, "see there, they drank," is an oversimplification and doesn't address a host of issues that are alive and well in our modern world. Yes, they got drunk back then. Yes, they had problems back then. But do we understand our times today? The problems today are exponentially greater than then, and if we aren't prepared to deal with them, and instead are more concerned about pushing our point that alcohol is fine to drink, then we need to ask whether we are allowing our desires for our own liberties to override the greater issues of love for the sake of others. What is our motivation?

III. Issues to Consider

NOTE: We bring up the following issues because anyone thinking about drinking needs to consider the implications of the practice in today's world. The biblical warnings are strong enough that anyone considering this should exercise great care and concern before participating in or advocating a practice that potentially could devastate lives and families. Even secular warnings concur. This isn't just about whether we can find passages here and there (in some proof-texting kind of way) that support or deny a position given a variety of contexts. God's word is meant to give us wisdom to discern right from wrong (Heb 5:14). In the face of difficulties, we need to think things out and decide, with wisdom from above, whether or not this is an activity Christians ought to be involved in today. Following are some principles that I urge us to keep in mind as we strive to understand the times and make wise choices:

A. Drunkenness is a process, not just a state. At what point do you call a person drunk? One doesn't just drink and drink, unaffected, then suddenly is drunk at the next sip. It takes time for the alcohol to take effect. Further, the point at which one is drunk is person-dependent, and the only way to know when too much has been imbibed is to test it out. In other words, you will never know your limits on this until you've exceeded them.

Does this sound wise?

1. Even law enforcement today will charge someone with DUI over a small percentage of a difference in the level of alcohol in one's system. Isn't it interesting that the person getting drunk usually won't think he is drunk? Alcohol (and other drugs) breaks down inhibitions and warps one's ability to make sound judgments. One of those warped judgments is just how sober one really is while drinking. Why would we do this to ourselves? If the person doing the drinking is not really the best one to determine whether too much has been imbibed, does that not signal that there is some loss of self-control?

2. While this same problem would have been around in biblical times, with the typical practice of diluting with water, given that the wine was alcoholic, it would have taken a good bit more drinking to reach that tipping point. Whereas the drinking parties back then would have served the purpose of getting drunk, today it is quite possible to get tipsy on far less amount and in less time than would have been normal then. This is a generalization, but not overly so given the nature of modern alcoholic beverages.

B. The reasons for drinking today are not always identical to ancient times. Should all reasons for drinking "wine" back then be equated to modern reasons? They didn't have a great deal of variety when it came to quenching a thirst, and many do argue that their water wasn't always the healthiest option alone (some will challenge that point, but not everyone had clean water, and it may well depend on the location). The point is that it wasn't always just about the taste, and, again, usually the alcohol was well diluted (the dilution factor varied, but usually the water was dominant). With as much emphasis as some will put on understanding the ancient culture as so important to understanding any given text, is it not odd that they wouldn't say the same when it comes to the passages dealing with wine and alcohol? If the circumstances and reasons for drinking today were identical to that of the ancients', proponents might have more to work with. But when it comes to drink and thirst quenching, it is not quite the same.

1. Consider (this quote is not trying to prove a biblical position):

"You've got to remember [that] for thousands of years, if you lived in a town or a village, the water was pretty undrinkable. ... [I]f you lived in ancient Athens or if you lived in ancient Babylon or Alexandria, you couldn't drink the water, so wine was something that people drank from morning to night. Babies drank it; old people drank it; soldiers drank it; everybody drank wine all the time, and in order for them not to be falling down drunk by 10 in the morning, they mixed it with water and used it to sanitize or purify the water." (Paul Lukacs author of "Inventing Wine: A New History of One of the World's Most Ancient Pleasures," NPR

interview).

2. “Babies drank it.” Now, is this what is happening today? Is this why most people are drinking today? Is this justifiable today? Do any of us give wine to our kids? Our babies? That’s what they did back then. Why aren’t we doing it now? Should we or should we not contextualize to our culture? Even our own secular laws recognize the dangers of this and outlaw drinking under the age of 21. Why do we suppose this is so? What makes it okay at age 21 that didn’t make it okay before then? Does the ability to drink at that age make us more mature, or does maturity make it okay to start drinking when we shouldn’t have before?

3. If we don’t think it’s wise to give wine to our babies or young people, whose wisdom are we using? Where does Scripture put an age limit on drinking alcohol? Or do we just arbitrarily do that of our own wisdom? Why not give it to our kids? Our teens? I suspect that all of us will say that there is a point at which wisdom -- today -- would say, “no, not the best thing to do.” Don’t just fall back on, “well our laws would say ‘no’ anyway.” Strip those laws away, would any of us be giving modern alcoholic beverages to our kids? Honestly? Or do we see a difference between then and now on this?

4. If we won’t give it to our kids, then we believe there is some modern adaptation due to differences between then and now. Even acknowledging “in certain circumstances” (i.e., as a medicine) recognizes the need to discriminate today. Whose wisdom are we using when we determine which circumstances are appropriate? Which passages will tell us, today, when the appropriate times and places are for it? Are there or are there not additional factors today that should be considered when deciding these issues?

C. In connection with the above, **the alcohol industry of the ancient world was not what it is today either.** As Geisler points out, America is an alcoholic culture, but the New Testament culture was not (*A Christian Perspective on Wine-Drinking*, Bibliotheca Sacra, January – March, 1982, p. 54). We live in a different world.

1. I’m sure that people could have made money selling fermented juice, but it wasn’t a multi-billion dollar industry that depended upon people, including those with real alcohol problems, buying and consuming their products in mass quantities. Distilled liquor is not equivalent to ancient drinks naturally fermented. Then, there were no major advertising campaigns going on for liquor. I seriously doubt that you would have seen billboards advertising the glories of the product.

2. A word study belongs to another lesson, but we know that there are a number of terms all translated by the one word “wine,” and these do not all denote the same thing. “Wine” in the Bible incorporates all the way from the grapes in the cluster to

the strong drinks. It is a mistake to take the one term from English and make it mean the same today across the board.

3. While “wine” is used to translate a number of Hebrew and Greek terms that includes the juice still in the grape to the stronger stuff, you still wouldn’t have had the vast array of choices found in modern liquor stores. People could certainly get drunk back then, and they did, but it was not nearly the type of industry being flaunted today. What does this have to do with it all? Simply this: Drinking juice with little (or even no) fermentation content (especially compared to today), typically diluted, was part of a daily culture that had little choice in drinks and sometimes may have needed its water doctored. Our cultures do not compare very well here. We need to see more evidence that shows comparable cultures in the making, distributing, and overall use of alcohol for recreational purposes.

4. I read an article arguing that beer drinkers should stop drinking certain types of beers, like Budweiser, Corona, Miller Lite, Michelob Ultra, Coors Light, and Pabst Blue Ribbon because they contain GMO corn syrup, sugars, and other ingredients considered harmful by the FDA. The article states, “While foods and non alcoholic beverages are required to list their ingredients and are monitored by the FDA, beer does not belong in either. Alcohol industry had lobbied for years to avoid labeling its ingredients. Some to protect its recipes, but most – to hide harmful ingredients.” This article was not anti-alcohol, as it was pushing for the use of a “healthy beer alternative” (<http://anonhq.com/8-beers-that-you-should-stop-drinking-immediately/>).

D. Alcoholism today is a real and serious problem that is never helped by anyone flaunting a right to drink. If Romans 14 teaches anything, it is that we must not use any perceived rights to the detriment of our brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. If someone is struggling with alcoholism, we must respond with compassion and a desire to help. It is bad enough that this person, even after receiving help, may well be tempted by the mere suggestion. Alcoholism is a serious, recognized problem today, and it is often attended with other debilitating issues like depression. I cannot be party to that, especially since it is so unnecessary today and has the immediately real potential to leave behind a trail of blood and tears. Even one night of drinking a little much can lead to a lifetime of heartache. (I recall two classmates of mine in H.S., after a night a drinking, were involved in a car accident that took their lives and destroyed the life of the driver, who was also drunk.)

E. If you have never been around a real drinker and witnessed first hand the havoc drinking can bring into a home, then you ought to educate yourself about this problem. It’s not pretty, it’s not distinguished, and it’s not cool. I admit that my experiences have jaded me a bit, but I know this much -- if we never get started on it, we don’t become problem drinkers, and the stakes are very high in today’s world. Homes have been

destroyed. Countless lives have been lost. Honestly, it angers me when I see billboards depicting some “man of distinction” holding his alcohol and acting as if this is the life. They won’t show you the highway wrecks (again, not something you would have seen in the ancient world), the shed blood, the devastated homes and children, just because someone wanted to be a “man of distinction.” You may say that this doesn’t “prove” it’s wrong, and no, it doesn’t, but it certainly is not a point in its favor for being right.

1. We cannot afford to ignore the fact that alcohol consumption has done untold damage to modern families and society. One can try to justify drinking, but why throw in with something that is both so unnecessary and so destructive in our modern context? One may think he can handle it, but what alcoholic today began drinking without thinking that he can handle it? We have to ask if that unnecessary risk of 1) starting down a path that may destroy our family, others, and us and 2) influencing another that cannot handle it, is worth our public support. No non-drinker becomes a problem drinker until he starts drinking. But why exactly does someone want to start drinking? Why today, and to what end?

2. We can debate the technicalities that reflect the “legalism” of needing specific prohibitions or specific allowances from Scripture, but that misses the bigger picture of wisdom and the direction God’s word points in terms of how we ought to behave in sobriety and holiness. The practical outcome is that the problem of alcoholism today is enormous, and if we aren’t prepared to deal with that, we have bigger issues to work on. God puts a premium on keeping alert and sober as a direct reflection of holiness in Christ (1 Pet. 1:13-16). Shall we say, “I’m willing to risk that because I don’t think it is technically condemned”? Those of us who aren’t willing to risk it have our reasons, and these reasons are solidly built around wisdom and discernment.

F. Consider, in line with the previous point, the importance of not putting stumbling blocks in the path of others for whom Christ died.

1. Promoting something that would cause another to stumble is clearly against the spirit of love in Scripture (Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8). There are a number of Christians who are presently struggling with alcohol issues, and some will see how dogmatically those claiming the right to drink are defending the practice.

2. Even something like social media is a huge difference between then and now, and the influence that goes out through posts and arguments needs to weigh heavily on our consciences. What we say on social media may go out all over the world to influence those with whom we have no contact or even know exist. If I am promoting what will cause others to stumble (and I will not know who all is struggling), I will bear a heavy burden. Do we think about this? Are we thinking about our brothers and sisters who, right now, bear the burden of alcoholism?

G. Does this mean we don’t show what Scripture says about it? Of course we want

to study what Scripture says about it, but in the end, where will our influence be pushing people? Do we present the warnings and problems that our present world is experiencing with alcohol? Are we encouraging a practice that has, does, and will cause many to stumble, some in the most egregious ways?

1. I'm far more concerned about emboldening a weak brother to start drinking than I am to embolden him to express his concerns and cautions. Even with a liberty, Paul was far more concerned about giving it up than keeping it, for the sake of the brothers for whom Christ died.

2. If this were a matter of necessity— as if God commanded drinking—we would be having a different discussion. But He doesn't. Instead, the love for those who struggle is listed as far more important than the rights of those who don't. If Rom. 14 or 1 Cor. 8 teaches us anything, it teaches this. Will we throw our influence in the direction of putting that temptation and stumbling block in front of those who struggle (and we may not even know who is struggling)? What will you do when confronted with one of those brothers?

a. "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died." (1 Cor. 8:9-11)

b. "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles" (Rom 14:21).

c. Even something that is lawful isn't necessarily going to edify or be profitable (1 Cor. 10:23). Sometimes I wonder how well we've learned this point.

3. While many argue it is good to drink, Paul also said it is good not to drink — especially in view of how many stumble. I will advocate for the good of not drinking in order to help the stumbling brethren be able to avoid it.

4. Some will argue, "But they just need to be taught better." Interestingly, Paul does give instructions about the issues he brought up -- "food will not commend us to God..." Yet the weaker brother may continue with his scruples anyway. The responsibility lies first with the brother who has the knowledge because not all have that. Further, Paul's approach is not, "Teach them so that they will no longer think what they think." The approach is, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble" (1 Cor 8:13).

5. This is not to say that the strong cannot instruct, but it needs to be done with love, compassion, and a recognition that the issue involved is not in any way necessary to act on or believe. Nor does it indicate in these passages that the weak brother must admit that he was wrong. If he remains conscientious about the issue, it

does not endanger his salvation. Therefore, for the brother with knowledge to push the issue is out of line and contrary to the spirit of these passages. It's easy to think that the weak brother just needs to learn and admit he was wrong, but that's not part of these instructions. He is perfectly in line with God's will in maintaining his abstinence.

H. The comparison between drinking alcohol and other "bad habits" just doesn't work, unless we are actually talking about drugs that significantly alter sobriety and the ability to make sound judgments. There are plenty of those types of mind-altering drugs, but comparing drinking to eating donuts is ludicrous. We aren't just talking here about long-term health. We are talking about the immediate effects that destroy one's ability to think and be sober. (If eating donuts does that to you, then by all means quit eating them.) I have yet to meet the person who destroyed a family or killed someone in a car wreck over losing one's mind on donuts. If that kind of comparison is the justification for drinking today, then please rethink the approach. Don't turn this issue into, "but there are lots of other sins and problems and one is just as bad as the other." Some issues have the potential to effect far greater devastation and immediate consequence. Alcohol is one of those. Let's not be deceived about that.

1. People sometimes argue about the "logical ends" with this issue. That is, if we take this reasoning, then we can't eat candy or we can't have sex or we can't eat because of gluttony. The "logical ends" are, I believe, misapplied. Let's take the "sex" analogy for a moment.

a. If a person is struggling with sexual immorality, we don't tell him, "do it in moderation." We tell him either to refrain or get married where the context for sexual relations is acceptable. If he can't get married, we tell him to refrain. The boundaries are clearly marked out. There is no supposing. There is no wondering how much sex is okay. The lines are clear.

b. Perhaps gluttony is a better similarity. Even then, if a person overeats once, it is unlikely that he will lose his mental faculties, do and say things he has no later memory of, and potentially string out blood on a highway by getting in a car and driving. In Florida (2014), there were at least 11 cases of drunk drivers getting on the wrong side of the highway within just a few months, and several deaths as a result. I have yet to hear that a case of overeating had any such effect.

c. While self-control is ultimately the issue, the consequences of even one misuse of alcohol are exponentially greater than the misuse of other things. The only real similarity would be other mind-altering drugs.

I. With the above principles in mind, here are some questions and thoughts:

1. Is it the right thing to do today?
2. Is it the wise thing to do today?
3. Is it something that will glorify God today? If so, then how?

4. Is it something that will strengthen my family today? If so, then how?

5. Is it something that will yield a proper influence on others today? If so, then how?

6. Is it something that will keep my thinking sharp and focused on the Kingdom? If so, then how? If not, should I be doing it?

7. Is it something that will enable my faith to grow stronger? If so, then how? If not, should I be doing it?

8. Is it something that I am comfortable doing in the Lord's presence?

9. Is it something that I am comfortable doing with the Lord and His Spirit present in me?

10. One might say, "You can apply those questions to many activities." So be it. But that doesn't change the topic under consideration right now that involves something that has been proven to be so mind-altering, destructive, and deadly. The choices we make about this issue can, in the most literal sense, mean life or death. Again, what is the wise and discerning choice to make today?

11. "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit..." (Eph 5:18).

J. Motivation is a key issue in the wisdom of drinking alcohol. Why do it? Why would we want to do it, especially given that there are so many alternatives today that would not put us in a position of potentially compromising far more than we really want to? To reiterate:

1. When the cultural and necessary circumstances under which something was done thousands of years ago are not shared by modern cultural circumstances, then using the ancient practice to justify modern social drinking is fallacious.

2. Abuse is a problem. But now, today, in our circumstances and culture, which is very different from that of the ancient world, the problem of alcoholism has ripped out the heart of families, destroyed hundreds of thousands of souls, and strung out countless dead along the way. If we are going to promote drinking in moderation, we better be prepared to deal with the reality of what may well happen to some individuals and families whom we have influenced to take it up. For that reason alone, I could never tell someone, "Yes, take up drinking; it's the wise thing to do today." Don't just think legalistic technicalities. Think Wisdom and Discernment.

3. Are the reasons for drinking today (mostly) the same as back then? Is the alcohol identical? Does it serve the same purposes today as back then? Was it made the same way as today? Was it a multi-billion dollar enterprise with massive factories for putting it out, along with its massive advertising campaigns? Is everyone the same when it comes to moderation?

4. Is the larger impact of drinking alcohol today identical to back then? I'm just

not sure we can afford sweep this away with a “just be careful about abusing it” nod.

5. Again, I’m asking these questions and dealing with this info out of a sense of trying to make the wisest decisions in our modern context -- the only context in which we can live. Surely people can see right up front that there are notable differences that ought to be considered before making across-the-board assumptions about all alcohol.

Conclusion:

Wisdom makes us cautious and gives us perspective. It helps us to avoid problems that may well come from throwing caution to the wind. When it comes to an issue like alcohol consumption, the stakes are quite high, and once we start down this path, we may end up where we never dreamed. It won’t be because we intended to end that way. It will be because of the deceptive nature of what alcohol can do and has done to millions. It warrants a serious consideration of the problem of alcoholism, the effects it has had on families, and the death toll it has taken over the years. The modern problem is hardly the same as the ancient problem because of the exponential effects in the modern world. Not that they didn’t have problems then, but how much more even now? Be wary. Be careful. Be wise. For my part, I cannot condone, recommend, or be party to helping someone start down a path with an ugly destination that is well documented in today’s culture. I have seen where it can lead, and I won’t lead anyone else down that path.

Prepared for Exploring Current Issues Conference, Oct 5-6, 2015, Cullman, AL
Rev. 10/7/2015