

THE CHRISTIAN AND ALCOHOL

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I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, Barrett was enjoying lunch with a good friend. When their conversation turned to their children, he mentioned that his daughter had just turned 21. They talked about life with older children and then his friend asked him if he had bought his daughter her first drink on her twenty-first birthday. He replied that the idea had never occurred to him. He certainly never expected a dedicated evangelical Christian, which this friend certainly is, to ask him that question. The thought that Barrett would introduce his daughter to alcohol, and even legitimize it by buying the first drink, was abhorrent to him. Yet, to this man, who is a member of a denomination that is much more open to the use of alcohol, buying your child her first drink was just part of the coming of age process. Barrett admits that he bought all three of his children their first McDonald's french fries. In fact, he confesses that he guarded that privilege very carefully and looked forward to seeing the delight in their eyes the first time they bit into those crispy, salty, tender morsels. As bad as a regular diet of McDonald's food would have been if his children had taken too much of a liking for their food, Barrett considered that first introduction an important moment of bonding with each of his children. We suppose Barrett's Christian friend felt similarly about his first drink with his child, but for most Baptists treating your child to her first meal at McDonald's and introducing her to the use of alcohol are not the same things.

This brief exchange illustrates the differing attitudes among Christians toward alcohol use. Some Christian denominations appear to be very accepting of alcohol use. Others have a long history of opposition to it. For example, Southern Baptists have been known historically as total abstainers. Not all Southern Baptists have adhered to this commitment, but if one were to examine the constitution of most Southern Baptist churches, certainly most of those constituted prior to

1960, one would probably find a clause in which the congregation pledged itself to refrain from the use and sale of alcoholic beverages.

II. SOUTHERN BAPTISTS' RESOLUTIONS ON ALCOHOL

While the Bible may be subject to various interpretations concerning alcohol consumption (as well as the nature of the beverage consumed), Southern Baptists' understanding of the issue has been exceedingly unambiguous. In the Convention's history, SBC messengers have adopted over forty resolutions on the issue prior to its 2006 resolution—as recently as 1991 and as early as 1886.

Southern Baptists meeting in session have called their brothers and sisters to live “an exemplary Christian lifestyle of abstinence from beverage alcohol and all other harmful drugs” (1984); to recognize alcohol as “America's number one drug problem” (1982); to “reaffirm our historic position as opposing alcohol as a beverage” (1978); to view “personal abstinence” as the “Christian way” (1957); to express their “unceasing opposition to the manufacture, sale and use of alcoholic beverages” (1955); to realize alcohol is a “habit-forming and destructive poison” (1940) and the “chief source of vice, crime, poverty and degradation” (1936); and to “reassert our truceless and uncompromising hostility to the manufacture, sale, importation and transportation of alcoholic beverages” (1896).

III. A SHIFT IN ATTITUDE

Over the last two decades, attitudes toward alcohol use among some Southern Baptists have moderated, however. This is especially true among some younger Southern Baptist adults. The greatest evidence of the recent shift in attitudes occurred at the 2006 annual Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina. At that meeting, the Resolutions Committee brought a resolution that called on churches to reaffirm their historical attitude toward alcohol consumption. If this resolution had been presented twenty years earlier, it would have been met with yawns, with many present wondering why the Convention needed to spend time on an issue that was so settled among Southern Baptists. However, this meeting revealed a much different attitude. There were certainly no yawns. In fact, that resolution produced more discussion and dissent than any other resolution presented at the meeting. Some messengers were so convinced of their freedom to consume alcoholic beverages that they took to the floor of the convention and urged the body not to adopt the resolution. In the end, according to press reports more than four-fifths approved the resolution, but a small, vocal group voted against it.

No doubt many factors have contributed to the shift we are seeing among some Southern Baptists and other evangelicals toward greater

acceptance of alcohol consumption. Broader social acceptance of drinking, very little preaching on the “evils of alcohol,” a more secularized church community, and a growing attitude of independence among church members have all contributed in various ways. Nevertheless, when one considers the high cost of alcohol abuse to individuals, families, and society, it is surprising that some in the evangelical community, including some Southern Baptists, insist on their right to drink. Alcohol problems cost American society more than \$184 billion per year in health care, criminal justice, social services, property damage, and loss of productivity expenses. Alcohol is a factor in as many as 105,000 deaths annually in the United States and a primary contributor to a wide array of health problems and human suffering. These include various cancers, liver disease, alcoholism, brain disorders, motor vehicle crashes, violence, crime, spousal and child abuse, drownings, and suicides. Even those who are able to control their drinking should recognize that they are engaged in a behavior that is destroying millions of lives, and choose to abstain rather than encourage by their behavior someone to drink who will not be able to control his drinking.

We have both had twenty and thirty-something Southern Baptists tell us they are not energized or excited about what they call ancillary issues like alcohol usage. They want to address “real” issues, like alleviating poverty. Both of us have responded that given the ravages and human misery visited on our society by alcohol, one of the most effective ways to alleviate poverty in our country is to do all we can by word and example to discourage people from alcohol consumption. One minister-son of an alcoholic father said to Richard, “Alcohol took the food off the table, then the table, then the linen off the bed, then the bed, and then our home itself away from our family.” We should make sure that we aren’t contributing in any way to this kind of human misery.

IV. THE HIGH PRICE OF SOCIAL DRINKING

In modern American society, the human toll taken by alcohol abuse is staggering. According to a recent *USA Today/HBO* poll, 20 percent of Americans indicated they “had an immediate relative who at some point had been addicted to alcohol or drugs.” In commenting on this poll, writer Rita Rubin notes in her *USA Today* article, “That translates into roughly 40 million American adults with a spouse, parent, sibling or child battling addiction.” When you add the millions of children living with addicted parents, you are talking about a devastating problem that adversely impacts the lives of nearly half the people in our nation—and virtually all users of other drugs start with alcohol, that’s why it’s called the “gateway” drug. The *USA Today* article quotes Sis Wenger, executive director of the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, as saying,

“For every person who’s alcoholic or dependent on other drugs, there are at least four or five people hurt on a regular basis.”¹

Of course, one must be careful when speaking to the issue of alcohol consumption. After all, many medicines contain alcohol. One can find it in fairly high percentages in cough syrup, for example. Compared to beverage alcohol, some over-the-counter nighttime cold syrups are more than fifty proof. That’s a fairly high alcohol content, higher than beer and wine. As far as we know, no one in the Southern Baptist Convention would consider it sinful or inappropriate if someone drank these medications to help cope with the symptoms of a cold or flu.

What is of concern when it comes to alcohol consumption, however, is its recreational/social use. While about 60 percent of the United States population drinks alcohol recreationally/socially, the historic Southern Baptist attitude has been opposed to this use of alcohol. What the 2006 Southern Baptist Convention meeting revealed, however, is that this is changing, at least among a vocal minority of church pastoral leadership. No one has a firm statistic on just how many Southern Baptists drink alcohol recreationally/socially, but most of those who have been paying attention know that at least some Southern Baptists drink alcoholic beverages at least occasionally. To date, this attitude has not flowed very far into the ranks of the pastoral staff. Most members of pastoral staffs still do not drink alcoholic beverages.

V. WHAT SAITH THE SCRIPTURES?

Because alcohol is such a dangerous substance, and because attitudes toward alcohol use appear to be changing in some evangelical circles, including among some Southern Baptists, it is necessary to review the biblical teaching on the issue. Both the Old and New Testaments speak of alcoholic beverages, and they use many words to refer to them. In the OT, one finds at least eight words that refer to the juice of the grape and a couple words that refer to alcoholic beverages made from substances other than grapes or with higher alcohol content, often translated as “strong drink,” “beer,” or “liquor.”²

At some point in the Bible practically all of these words speak of alcoholic beverages in a negative context. However, it appears that the negative aspect is principally related to the debilitating effects on people, not to the alcoholic beverage itself. Alcohol as a substance is not inherently evil. For example, Lot’s daughters got Lot drunk with wine (*yayin*) and then slept with him (Gen 19:30–38), yet Ps 104:14–15 speaks

¹ Rita Rubin, “In Tim Ryan’s Family, He is the Addict,” *USA Today*, July 20, 2006.

² The Hebrew words translated as wine are: *yayin*, *chemer*/ar. *chamar*, *sobe*; as new wine: *tirosh*; as sweet wine: *asis*; as mixed wine: *mimsak*, *mezeg*, as aged wine: *shemer*.

of wine (*yayin*), “which makes man’s heart glad,” as one of God’s provisions for man. Wine (*yayin*) is often mentioned as one of the ingredients used in offerings to God (see Exod 29:40). Even sweet wine (*‘asis*), which is thought by many to be mere grape juice, can intoxicate (see Isa 49:26), yet Joel 3:18, speaking of the day when God restores Judah, says “the mountains will drip with sweet wine (*‘asis*).”³

The same can be said for the Hebrew word often translated “strong drink” (*shekar*). The biblical attitude toward strong drink is much more negative than its attitude toward wine. Of the word’s twenty-two uses, only its occurrence in Prov 31:6–7 offers an unambiguously positive perspective of its use for human consumption.⁴ Yet, despite the Bible’s predominantly negative attitude toward it, even strong drink was used in drink offerings to the Lord (see Num 28:7). This certainly suggests that it was not an inherently “evil” substance.

While alcohol is not evil in itself, the OT contains many cautions and restrictions to its use. The Proverbs are a repository of Hebrew wisdom regarding the dangers of alcohol. Proverbs 23:29–35 speak of the deceptive allure of wine. Though its deep red color and sparkle make it pleasant to look at, and it creates an enjoyable sensation as one swallows it, its end result is far from pleasant and enjoyable. Solomon tells the wisdom-seeker that it produces emotional, interpersonal, personal, and physical trouble (v. 29), and that its final effect will be deadly. These effects are not readily apparent when one looks at the liquid in the cup, however.

³ R. L. Harris, “*‘asis*,” *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980) 2:686, comments that the sweet wine (*‘asis*) of antiquity “seems to refer to stronger wine (cf. Greek *gleukas*, Acts 2:13). It may mean wine that was stronger because made from sweeter juice.” Frederic Richard Lees and Dawson Burns, *The Temperance Bible-Commentary* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1868) 225, understood this passage in Isaiah differently. They translated the Hebrew term *yishkahrun* (“they shall be drunk”) as an active verb form, rendering the passage to mean, “They shall drink to the full.” Understood this way, the passage does not speak of the intoxicating effect of the beverage but merely of drinking until one is full. They argue that the use of the word *‘asis* in Joel 1:5 can also be understood to refer to non-alcoholic grape juice, Lees and Burns, *The Temperance Bible-Commentary*, 225. Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 237, supports their view with his translation: “Wail, all you wine drinkers! Because of the juice of the grape (*‘asis*), for it is cut off from your mouths.” While this understanding of the term *‘asis* is a minority view, the renderings are plausible.

⁴ Deut 14:26 mentions that the Israelites could purchase strong drink to use as part of their sacrificial meal at the place of worship. Most commentators believe the purchaser drank the strong drink during the meal, but it is possible that the strong drink was actually offered to the Lord. Num 28:7 mentions the use of strong drink as a drink offering to the Lord, so it is possible that Deut 14:26 anticipates that the purchaser will use the strong drink for this purpose.

Solomon compares alcohol to a snake. A snake can be nearly mesmerizing with its slow, graceful movements. Its true nature can be completely overlooked. Yet, if one fails to respect its nature, that snake will surprise the unwary person with a bite that could possibly be deadly (v. 32). Solomon says the user of this snake-like substance will experience visual and mental impairment (v. 33) and severe physical instability (v. 34). It can even make one so unaware of his environment that he cannot even respond to physical danger and attacks (v. 35). Yet in spite of all of this, alcohol is so deceptive that the one who has been through such a terrible ordeal will want more (v. 35).

Proverbs 20:1 offers a similar characterization. It says that wine is a mocker (*lets*) and strong drink is a brawler (*homeh*). Both Hebrew forms are participles. It is likely that Solomon has personified these intoxicating beverages and characterized them with these terms. It is in their nature to do what they do. No one should be surprised by the result of their influence. F. Delitzsch distinguishes between the meanings of these two terms. He comments that wine is a mocker “because he who is intoxicated with it readily scoffs at that which is holy,” and strong drink is a brawler “because he who is inebriated in his dissolute madness breaks through the limits of morality and propriety.”⁵ Delitzsch is probably correct in his effort to identify different meanings in these two terms. This passage is likely emphasizing different effects of alcohol in the same way that Prov 23:29–35 does. Additionally, the proverb emphasizes the deceptive nature of alcohol. It says that alcohol leads people astray (*shogeh*). A person thinks he is getting one thing when he drinks alcohol, but he is actually getting something entirely different. What is more, the proverb adds the ultimate insult to anyone foolish enough to be led astray by alcohol. Such a person is the opposite of the kind of person God commends. The person led astray by alcohol is not “wise” (*chakam*). The Hebrew word used here is the standard Hebrew word for “wisdom.” The very purpose of the book of Proverbs is to impart wisdom. The one who allows himself to fall under the influence of alcohol is engaging in behavior contrary to that of a wise man.

Proverbs 31:6–7 is possibly the most enigmatic biblical passage that mentions the use of alcohol. In this passage, the person referred to as King Lemuel is counseled to “Give strong drink to him who is perishing, And wine to him whose life is bitter. Let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his trouble no more.” The words “strong drink” (*shekar*) and “wine” (*yayin*) are the standard Hebrew words for alcoholic beverages. A casual reading of these verses can lead some to conclude that it is permissible to drink alcohol. Technically, they are correct. While this passage permits the use of alcohol, it is crucial that one take a closer look at just what is being said here.

⁵ Franz Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, trans. M. G. Easton (1872; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 2:39.

First, the passage sets up a deliberate contrast between what the king should not do and what others can do. By use of literary structure, the king's obligations regarding alcohol are made clear. In v. 4, the king is told, "It is not for kings to drink wine (*yayin*), or for rulers to desire strong drink (*shekar*)."⁶ The same two words for alcoholic beverages are used here and in vv. 6 and 7. This repetition creates a chiasmic structure. Notice this structure below:

4. It is not for kings to drink wine (*yayin*)
Or for rulers to desire strong drink (*shekar*),
5. For they will drink (*shatah*) and forget (*shachak*) what is decreed,
And pervert the rights of the afflicted.
6. Give strong drink (*shekar*) to him who is perishing,
And wine (*yayin*) to him whose life is bitter.
7. Let him drink (*shatah*) and forget (*shachak*) his poverty
And remember his trouble no more.

These four verses utilize an elaborate chiasmic structure to create contrast between parallel ideas. The first structure utilizes the words *yayin* and *shekar* in an ABBA structure. In v. 4 *yayin* occurs in the first stich followed by *shekar* in the second stich. Verse 6 uses the same two words but in reverse order. This reversal of terms creates an inclusio in which v. 4 is balanced against v. 6 so that the verses should be thought of as a literary unit. A second structure ties together vv. 5 and 7. Verses 5a and 7a use the terms *shatah* and *shachak*. In this way, the writer extends the literary unit beginning at v. 4 to include v. 7. The inter-relationship created by these structures requires that vv. 4 through 7 be read together in order to understand what is being said.

A further Hebrew poetic device known as antithetic parallelism drives home the point of the unit. In the case of this passage the parallelism begins with the negative, vv. 4–5, followed by the positive statement, vv. 6–7. Taken together, the literary structure presents the following instruction: Kings are not to drink alcoholic beverages because they will interfere with their judgment. The writer begins with the broader issue at stake, the decree, or civil law. Alcohol impairs memory. If the king forgets what the law says, he may very possibly violate the rule of law in making decisions. This cannot be allowed. Then follows a specific application of the danger of such an affront: the legal rights of the

⁶ Scholars have struggled with the unusual terminology and construction of this verse for centuries. Many have suggested emendations to correct the supposed errors in the text. Emendation is not necessary, however. G. R. Driver, "Problems in the Hebrew Text of Proverbs," *Biblica* 32 (1951): 194–95, has demonstrated that the consonantal text of the Masoretic Text (MT) is readable and that it produces the reading given above. F. Delitzsch, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon* (1872; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 1:320–22, has also argued convincingly for the veracity of the MT at this point.

“afflicted” may be violated. The teaching is clear, the king must uphold the rule of law and he cannot let anything impair his ability to do that.

In contrast, Lemuel’s mother advises the king that this prohibition on the use of alcohol is not absolute. Two categories of people can use it. The first type of person is the one who is perishing (*’obed*). The Hebrew word refers to someone who is dying. In such an instance, alcohol can serve to calm the person and possibly reduce pain. The second type of person is one whose life is bitter (*bene’-’oni*). This unusual construction refers to someone whose life is characterized by affliction. He is literally “a son of affliction.” Chronic conditions are in mind here. While the nature of this chronic condition is not explained, the phrase cannot be interpreted to mean someone who is experiencing a momentary time of difficulty.⁷

The application to the contemporary situation is obvious. As it relates to the king, alcohol impairs performance. This advice is not directed at Lemuel alone, however. The passage presents its advice to the king in the form of a universal principle. The king’s mother says, “It is not for kings” The use of the impersonal, plural term “kings” reveals that she is reminding Lemuel of a universal, timeless principle. Those in positions of responsibility cannot partake of alcohol because others are dependent on them to be at their very best at all times.

On the positive side, the passage commends the use of alcohol as a medicinal aid, but not its recreational use. The two types of people referred to in this passage are in desperate situations. One group is on the verge of death and the other is suffering from some chronic affliction. Even here, we should not think of people whose lives are trapped in such conditions as poverty or the social margins. If this passage advised people in these situations to use alcohol to forget their impoverished condition, it would be violating its counsel in other places. In fact such counsel would be more than a contradiction of the advice not to drink, it would actually advise people to engage in the very behavior that it counsels in other places can lead to an impoverished state.

Proverbs 23:20–21 states explicitly that heavy drinking leads to poverty. For one to forget his trouble, something more than an occasional drink would be required. If his condition were not chronic before he started drinking to forget, it almost certainly would become so. It is inconceivable that God would counsel people to engage in behavior that he has already declared abhorrent and which also leads to their destruction. It seems much more likely that the counsel offered in Prov 31:6–7 is addressed to those who are suffering from something like chronic pain. Those in such conditions would be using alcohol

⁷ Allen Ross, *Proverbs* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 1128, includes mental distress as a possible application of this passage. We can imagine that severe grief, as in the case of the loss of a loved one, could meet the criteria as well.

medicinally. The principle is that those suffering from the types of conditions described here can make use of drugs that relieve their suffering.

It is also of note that this passage is not addressed to people suffering from these problems. The passage provides advice to Lemuel about what he should do. He should not drink, but he should let those who meet the prescribed criteria drink. The passage speaks to the way in which Lemuel should relate to those who depend on him to govern wisely. He should commit himself to be a sober judge and he should act mercifully toward those in the last days of their lives or in chronic pain. The passage doesn't tell those people what they should do. It tells the king what he should do. Consequently, the passage does not instruct people to drink, nor does it give them permission to drink. It merely tells the king what he should do. The passage implies that those who suffer from these conditions can drink alcohol to bring them some relief from their suffering, but this is not a directive to do so.

While Prov 31:4–7 does not permit the recreational use of alcohol, it does bring us to the discussion of its medicinal use. It is clear that the Bible does not condemn all uses of alcohol. Its medicinal value is recognized in the NT as well. The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to “use a little wine” for his stomach ailments (1 Tim 5:23). This apostolic advice to Timothy could well indicate that Timothy was a total abstainer and that Paul had to urge his reluctant son in the faith to consume wine with alcohol for health purposes.

In a time when medicines were very rare, alcohol was one of the few medicinal aids available to assist the human condition. These positive references to alcohol consumption for medicinal purposes tell us that the mere consumption of alcohol in itself is not a sin. If it were, then these passages would be instructing people to sin. Today, people have much less reason to drink alcohol medicinally. We have many more effective means for dealing with various physical and mental afflictions that do not have the potential to cause the kinds of significant damage and grief that alcohol can cause.

The NT has a more limited vocabulary to refer to alcoholic beverages. They are *oinos*, *gleukos*, and *sikera*. The word *sikera* is used only once in the NT. It refers to intoxicating beverages that are not classified as wine, such as grain-based alcohol or wine that has added ingredients to increase its inebriating effect. The word is used in combination with the word *oinos* to describe John the Baptist's complete abstinence from alcohol (see Luke 1:15). The principal Greek word (*oinos*), translated “wine,” is used more than thirty times. When used in its non-metaphorical sense, it appears to run the full gamut of meanings, from grape juice, usually qualified by the adjective “new,” to the fully fermented alcoholic beverage. While it is common knowledge that people drank beverages containing alcohol in the early days of the church, the NT is not nearly as accommodating of the practice. In fact, except for the

handful of references in the Gospels that speak of wine, (i.e. Jesus' lesson about new wine and wineskins, Matt 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37–39; John the Baptist's abstinence, Luke. 1:15; 7:33; medicinal use, Mark 15:23; Luke 10:34; and the wedding feast at Cana, John 2:3, 9, 10; 4:46),⁸ and the neutral and metaphorical references in Revelation (i.e. wine spared destruction, Rev 6:6; wine as a metaphor for wrath, Rev 14:8, 10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3; and wine as a commercial product, Rev 18:13), one encounters only negative statements in the NT about the non-medicinal use of wine.

The other NT term for alcoholic beverages is *gleukos*. In Acts 2:13 the observers supposed that the apostles were full of “sweet wine” (*gleukos*) because of their behavior when the Holy Spirit had filled them. Evidently, even “sweet wine” was known to have intoxicating power.

Except for one reference to its medicinal use (1 Tim 5:23), all of the remaining references outside of the Gospels to the actual fermented juice of the grape are warnings or prohibitions of its use or abuse. Romans 14:21 counsels Christians not to engage in any behavior, including drinking wine that would cause a fellow believer to stumble in his spiritual life. Ephesians 5:18 is a command to the Christian not to get drunk. To become drunk with alcohol is to put oneself under the controlling influence of something other than the Spirit of God. Paul calls drunkenness “dissipation.” Foerster concludes that the word “signifies wild and disorderly” behavior.⁹ It is easy to understand Paul's abhorrence of such an uncontrolled state. Scripture calls on God's people to live disciplined lives, ready at any time for the demands of spiritual warfare. Rather than being controlled by alcohol, the believer is to be filled, i.e. controlled, by the Holy Spirit.

In 1 Tim 3:3, 8 and Titus 1:7, Paul gives instructions about the role of alcohol among church leaders, whether pastors (1 Tim 3:3; Titus 1:7) or deacons (1 Tim 3:8). While the Greek phrases differ in these two passages, Seesemann concurs that both constructions warn against over-

⁸ It is also important to note that of all these instances in the Gospels only the event at Cana can be construed to speak positively about wine as something people might consume (John 2:3, 9, 10; 4:46). Jesus' lesson about wine and wineskins says nothing about drinking the beverage, only about its effect on wineskins as it ferments (Matt 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37–39). His concluding statement in Luke (5:39) doesn't condone drinking wine but is offered figuratively as an illustration of the problem of convincing people who have embraced the old way of the law to accept his new teaching about grace. The reference to John the Baptist is negative in nature (Luke 1:15; 7:33). He abstained from drinking alcohol. Jesus rejected alcohol as a medicinal aid at his crucifixion (Mark 15:23), and the Good Samaritan used it as topical medicine (Mark 15:23).

⁹ Werner Foerster, *asotos. asotia, TDNT*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 1:507.

indulgence.¹⁰ The matter of over-indulgence was of such concern to Paul that he instructed older women in the church not to over-indulge as well (Titus 2:3). To be sure, none of these passages require abstinence. Their concern is related to over-indulgence. It would also appear that Paul is speaking about regular practice. The people about whom Paul is speaking are those whose lives are characterized by excessive use of alcohol. According to Paul, church leaders were not to habitually drink alcohol in excess. If they did, they were disqualified from leadership.

This should not be interpreted to mean, however, that these passages permit church leaders to drink alcoholic beverages. In Paul's day, it would have been very difficult for someone not to drink wine. The alcohol content made it one of the safest liquids to drink. This is no longer the case in much of the world, certainly not in the industrialized world. Beverages containing alcohol are no longer needed in most of the world for hydration purposes. Even less plausible are arguments from these passages in support of the recreational/social use of alcohol today. Arguing against such an effort are the New Testament's many passages that call Christians to sobriety (*napho*), (see 1 Thess 5:1–11; 2 Tim 4:5; 1 Pet 1:13, 4:7, 5:8) and temperance (*naphalios*), (see 1 Tim 3:2, 11; Titus 2:2). While not alluding solely to the issue of alcohol induced impairment, these passages certainly include it.¹¹ One also finds many passages calling Christians to lifestyles contrary to those of the debauched culture (see Luke 21:34–36; Rom 13:12–14; Gal 5:19–24; 1 Pet 4:1–6).

While it is undeniable that some people in the Bible drank alcoholic beverages, we must keep in mind that the beverages these men and women consumed were not the kinds of alcoholic beverages people consume today. The alcohol content of beverages referred to in the Bible was considerably lower than many of today's alcoholic beverages. The distillation process that produces today's high-alcohol content drinks was not yet developed. Typically, the alcohol content of wine was around two to six percent. A high end alcohol content of around 15 percent was possible. Higher alcohol concentrations than this could not be achieved because the bacteria that cause fermentation die at this level. In addition, it was common to dilute wine with water.¹² Also, we must keep in mind

¹⁰ Heinrich Seesemann, *oinos*, *TDNT*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 5:165.

¹¹ Otto Bauernfeind, *napho*, *naphalios*, *eknapho*, *TDNT*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 4:936–41, argues that the terms *napho* and *naphalios* both include a literal as well as a figurative sense. There is no room in the Christian life for “mental fuzziness” or alcohol.

¹² A. R. S. Kennedy, “Wine and Strong Drink,” *Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. Frederick Grant and H.H. Rowley, rev.ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1963) 1038–39, note that 2 Macc 15:39 provides the first clear reference to diluting wine with water. He goes on to state that “in NT times the practice of dilution seems to have

that sanitary conditions were not what they are today. Alcohol provided an ideal way to maintain the potability of beverages. Without it, people would have suffered even more from common parasites and other health threatening ailments resulting from ingesting contaminated water (see 1 Tim 5:23).

Even so, one could certainly still overdo it when drinking these beverages, and unfortunately, some biblical characters did on occasion. When they did, the Bible seldom had anything positive to say about it. Indeed, their drunkenness usually resulted in inappropriate behavior, which was subsequently denounced by the biblical writer. Just consider the Bible's depictions and negative view of the drunken behavior of Noah (Gen 9:20–27), Lot (Gen 19:30–38), and Xerxes I (Esth 1:10–11). Noah's drunkenness created opportunity for Ham to see him naked. Ham responded to this in some unexplained inappropriate manner, causing Noah to pronounce a curse on Canaan, Ham's son. Lot's drunkenness provided the occasion for his two daughters to engage in incestuous behavior with their father. The children who were born from this became the perennial enemies of Israel, the Moabites and the Ammonites. Xerxes's drunkenness led him to make inappropriate demands of his wife, resulting in the king's rejection of her.

When one wants to find a positive picture of alcohol in the Bible, one must look at it from a much different angle—the angle of abstinence. The biblical Nazirites are the primary example of this attitude toward alcohol. The term Nazirite comes from a Hebrew verb which means “to separate or abstain.” The Nazirites were men and women who dedicated themselves in service to the Lord for some purpose. The term of their dedication could be for a set period of time or even for life. While relatively little is known about the Nazirites, it is clear that their commitment involved a vow of dedication to God. Probably as evidence of their commitment, God required certain lifestyle restrictions of those who took this vow. These restrictions included abstinence from alcohol. In fact, the Nazirite was to abstain from the consumption of all foods that had any part of the grape in them.¹³

The Lord cherished the Nazirites for their commitment. God was often involved in calling people to the Nazirite life. Speaking through Amos the prophet, God declared that he had “raised up” some of the young men in Israel to be Nazirites (Amos 2:11). While Samson's life was tragic in many ways, he was a Nazirite. He is the only judge whose birth was announced by the angel of the Lord, who instructed Manoah and his wife to raise Samson as a Nazirite (Judg 13:1–25).

been usual.” He notes instances of dilution with 2 and 3 parts water to one part wine.

¹³ Numbers 6:1–21 describes the requirements of the Nazirite vow. In addition to abstinence from all products containing grapes the Nazirite was also forbidden from cutting his or her hair and from touching a dead body.

Abstinence from alcohol appears to have been a crucial part of the Nazirite vow. When Amos chastised Israel for their treatment of the Nazirites, his complaint against the people was their role in forcing the Nazirites to drink wine (Amos 2:12). John the Baptist is generally considered to have been called by God to the Nazirite life. When the angel Gabriel announced to Zacharias that he would be the father of John, he emphasized that John's abstinence from alcohol would be a sign of his dedication to God (Luke 1:15).

The Rechabites were another group who abstained from alcohol. While the Nazirite vow was not tribal in nature, the Rechabites were all descendants of Rechab. They had been instructed by Rechab's son Jonadab to adopt certain lifestyle restrictions, including abstinence from the use of alcohol. God held this tribe in high regard for its steadfast commitment to Jonadab's instructions (Jer 35:1–19). The praise the tribe received from God was not because of their abstinence, but rather because of their faithful adherence to Jonadab's command, but when God sought to demonstrate their continuing commitment to Jonadab's instructions, he did so by asking Jeremiah to offer wine to some of them. They proved faithful to their ancestor, and God honored their faithfulness by promising them that “Jonadab son of Rechab will never fail to have a man to always stand before me” (Jer 35:19). The Bible doesn't say why God chose wine as the means to demonstrate their commitment, but we suspect that it was because it was one of the more difficult restrictions to keep. Their refusal to drink the wine proved the depth of their commitment to their vow, putting into even starker relief the failure of the Israelites to keep their commitment to God. We can't help but wonder if Christians face a similar test of their devotion to God today. Perhaps the opportunities to partake in more of what the world offers are tests that will demonstrate just how committed we are to God's calling on our lives.

VI. JESUS AND ALCOHOL

Of course, not everyone who was committed to serving the Lord was a Nazirite, and no doubt, some of these others drank beverages containing alcohol. As we have noted, on many occasions it would have been very difficult not to do so. It certainly appears that Jesus was not a Nazirite. In fact it seems certain that there were times when he drank beverages that contained alcohol. Jesus appears to draw attention to this when he distinguished himself from John the Baptist. In Matt 11:18–19, he said, “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon!’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard.’”

Before anyone decides to use Jesus as his excuse to drink alcohol, it is crucial to recognize that the term “drunkard” was used by his enemies

in an attempt to discredit him.¹⁴ He does not admit to ever being drunk in this passage, or of gluttony for that matter. Considering the Bible's clear condemnation of both practices, it is inconceivable that Jesus engaged in either. He does seem, however, to indicate that he did not totally abstain from beverages that had any alcohol content. Undoubtedly, Jesus' motivation for this behavior is important. He doesn't appear to have engaged in the practice because he felt it was his right to do so. Unfortunately, he doesn't say why. For his critics it was enough that he socialized with "sinners." Because of this socializing they attempted to discredit him in the eyes of the people. Yet, Jesus didn't even attempt to justify his behavior. It is likely that he felt there was nothing to justify. He socialized with people, and he was not apologetic for that. Instead, he noted the response of his critics and made a point—that the unbelieving just looked for excuses not to believe. His concluding comment likely asked the listeners to consider the fruit of his efforts and those of his detractors. The results of their different approaches to "sinners" would prove which was the wisest.

People often refer to Jesus' miracle at the wedding feast at Cana as evidence that he approved of alcohol consumption (John 2:1–11). We note several important features of this event, however. First, we cannot be positive that what Jesus created had alcoholic content. The headwaiter may have been commenting on how good the wine tasted not about its alcohol content. Second, John states that Jesus performed this miracle as a "sign" (John 2:11). He intended that those who witnessed this would see a spiritual significance in the miracle, not focus on the wine. In other words, he created the wine for another purpose, a much more important purpose than merely to provide the wedding guests with something to drink. Third, the text never says that Jesus drank any of this wine. Considering the Bible's very negative attitude toward drunkenness and Jesus' dedication to God, it is inconceivable to us that Jesus ever drank alcohol recreationally or that he was ever drunk. There is no biblical example of either occurrence, and people should not attempt to promote a practice based on the silence of Scripture.¹⁵

¹⁴ It is possible that Jesus' detractors were attempting to associate him with the negative characteristics condemned in Deut 21:20 and Prov 23:21. In those passages gluttony and drunkenness are singled out as particularly detestable behaviors.

¹⁵ Lees and Burns, *The Temperance Bible-Commentary*, 304–5, offer two objections to the notion that Jesus created wine with alcoholic content: First, "The process of fermentation is one of decay, and it is not probable that it would have been imitated, or its results realized, by the fiat of the Saviour. . . . To produce pure grape-juice, the unfermented fruit of the vine, would, if possible to man, be a closer imitation of the creative plan of Providence than calling a fermenting substance into existence." Second, "It is against the principle of scriptural and moral analogy to suppose that the Saviour exerted His supernatural energy to bring into being a kind of wine which had been condemned by Solomon and the

VII. OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

By now, it is obvious that one can find instances in the Bible when people drank alcoholic beverages. While most of these examples are negative, some clearly are not. Nevertheless, when one examines the full counsel of Scripture regarding alcohol use, there is little doubt that the Bible warns against its use and unequivocally condemns its abuse. Some Bible passages warn against drinking any alcoholic beverages because of their debilitating effects (Prov 23:29–35). Other passages instruct against the use of alcohol by those in positions of authority (Prov 31:4–5) and require sobriety of church leadership (1 Tim 3:3, 8; Titus 1:6). In no case is drunkenness ever condoned (Isa 5:11, 22; 28:7). In fact, there appears to be a clear movement in Scripture toward a rejection of alcohol use. We pointed out earlier that the OT had more positive references to alcohol use than the NT. This could be evidence that the Bible’s principles were gradually undermining the practice of alcohol consumption, much in the same way that biblical principles eventually undermined the practice of enslaving people.

Of further interest is the way in which the actual beverage used in the Lord’s Supper is referred to in the NT. Paul speaks of “the cup” whenever he refers to the Lord’s Supper (see 1 Cor 10:16, 21; 11:23–28). Even at the inauguration of this event, Jesus spoke of “the fruit of the vine” rather than using the term “wine” (see Matt 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20). Scholars are in general agreement that the phrase referred to wine, and we are not claiming that wine was not used in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, but we think it is significant that there is no direct reference in Scripture to an alcoholic substance in connection with it.

Those who cannot find chapter and verse to justify consuming alcohol still argue that their freedom in Christ enables them to imbibe. It is certainly true that Christians are no longer under the bondage of the Law. However, the freedom that Christians enjoy is not to be confused with license. Indeed, freedom in Christ always demands a higher standard of conduct than merely following the letter of the law. The Christian must always weigh his freedom against his responsibility in order to determine the appropriateness of certain behaviors. When considered from this perspective, it seems very clear that there are compelling reasons for abstaining from the consumption of beverage alcohol. Three principal reasons for this self-restraint are witness to the lost, service to the saved, and the appropriate treatment of the body.

prophets as ‘a mocker’ and ‘defrauder,’ and which the Holy Spirit had selected as an emblem of the wrath of the almighty.” They make a third observation as well, that the miracle is “in the fact that the Lord did in moments what normally takes months to achieve—the process of turning water into ‘the pure blood of the grape.’” We do not deny the plausibility of these arguments.

As a matter of witness, it is preferable that a Christian not do anything that would hinder his witness to others. While some have argued that they find greater acceptance among a certain subset of the population because they drink with them, this is not the case for the vast majority of people who need to be reached with the Gospel. In fact, many lost people have certain expectations of Christians, and one is that they do not drink. Many of the lost recognize this as a distinguishing feature between Christians who are serious about their faith and those outside of the faith. Furthermore, victims of alcohol-related crimes could be deeply offended by someone who is supposedly concerned about people's welfare engaging in an activity that has been so harmful to them. Considering the horrendous toll alcohol is taking on today's populace, it is also quite possible that many we hope to reach with the Gospel witness have been in the past or are currently being ravaged by the effects of alcohol abuse in their own lives or the life of a family member or close friend. For a Christian to drink in the presence of this person may be deeply hurtful to his or her witness. Such behavior might even be interpreted as insensitivity or as evidence that the drinking Christian is out of touch with the real world.

This principle of witness is especially apt in today's culture. Alcohol abuse is taking a staggering toll on millions of people and their families. It is inconceivable that one's concept of Christian freedom could include the freedom to engage in any behavior that has become so devastating to millions of those in and outside of the church. In fact, many people will be deeply offended if their pastor or other leader in their church appeared to be so unconcerned about the devastating consequences of alcohol abuse by drinking alcohol. Many of these people will have been deeply affected by the tragedy of alcohol abuse by a family member or close friend. A Christian leader's potential ministry to these people may be permanently damaged simply because that leader chose to exercise his liberty more than his responsibility.

The Christian must also keep in mind how the example of his own lifestyle influences others. This can be understood as the servant principle. The Christian is a servant of all. He should consider how he best serves others by his behavior, not how he can live his own life without regard to others. The controlling principle here is that of the weaker brother. Paul counsels Christians to refrain from any activity, including eating and drinking, that may encourage another to engage in activity that will end up leading to feelings of guilt in the weaker brother (Rom 14:13–23). He instructs Christians to pursue those things that edify others (1 Cor 10:23; 14:26).

We disagree with those who say they can drink alcoholic beverages in the privacy of their own homes because they are not influencing anyone to emulate them. Parents, for instance, must understand that their children will likely follow their example. It is a fact that the teenage children of parents who drink alcohol are significantly more likely to

experiment with alcohol as teenagers than the children of parents who abstain from alcohol consumption. It is just nearly impossible to engage in this activity unobserved by someone. We believe it would be tragic if someone were encouraged to engage in a behavior that destroyed their lives because of the example of someone they trusted.

Recently, Richard had an experience that illustrates clearly the sometimes unexpected result of a positive witness regarding abstaining from alcohol. On an extended trip with a group of non-Southern Baptist evangelical leaders, it became evident that he and his wife were the only ones in the group who were not drinking beverage alcohol. About two-thirds of the way through the trip, one of the leaders approached Richard and inquired why he and his wife were abstaining. This Christian brother was initially dismissive of total abstinence, stating that early in his ministry, he had abstained as well, but had now come to the place where he enjoyed his “liberty in Christ.” Richard responded with a summary of the arguments contained in this article and shared with him that if the greatest sacrifice Jesus ever required of him was not to drink alcohol and be considered odd as a result, he would be fortunate indeed. He and his wife later noticed that this evangelical leader and his wife abstained from the use of alcohol for the remainder of the trip. We can only imagine how many people could be influenced to think differently about their own use of alcohol and possibly avoid great personal tragedy if more Christians would be willing to make this simple sacrifice and abstain from beverage alcohol.

We understand that this argument can be made about many behaviors, overeating, for example. Of course, one cannot stop eating because someone might be encouraged to eat too much or to eat foods that are not healthy for them. But eating food and drinking alcohol are not the same. People have to eat, but they don’t have to drink alcohol. Alcohol consumption is purely a lifestyle choice. It is not a necessary part of one’s life, like eating.

The servant principle should certainly compel those in leadership roles in the church to abstain from alcohol use. In Prov 31:4–5 the king is counseled not to drink alcoholic beverages because it will cloud his judgment. It is also imperative that those responsible for leadership be available at all times for those in need. It would be a terrible disservice if a family had just experienced some tragic loss, and their pastor could not offer the spiritual counsel and support they needed because he had to sober up first.

The third principle applies to the appropriate treatment of the body. God created the human body. We should make every effort to treat our bodies with the respect they deserve as God’s creative masterpiece. The arguments that drinking alcohol in moderation is good for one’s health are blown completely out of proportion. The risks far outweigh the benefits of moderate alcohol consumption. Juergen Rehm, of the Ontario Center for Addiction and Mental Health, has expressed skepticism about

the actual health benefit of alcohol. He comments, “We need to be cautious about interpreting the studies that suggest a benefit. People who drink moderately are different from people who don’t drink—they exercise more, they have better medical insurance, their body-mass index is lower.”¹⁶ In other words, the health benefits some scientists are associating with moderate alcohol intake may be more a result of healthier lifestyles in general rather than the specific use of the alcohol. In addition, other scientists are pointing out that much of the health benefit in red wine comes from the grape, not the alcohol. All one must do to get most of the benefit is drink more grape juice or take vitamin supplements that contain the beneficial ingredients of the grape.

When one considers the significant adverse health effects of high alcohol use, it seems preferable not to take such risks at all. According to the Centers for Disease Control excessive drinking is associated with chronic diseases such as liver cirrhosis, pancreatitis, various cancers, including liver, mouth, throat, larynx, and esophagus, high blood pressure, and psychological disorders.¹⁷ No one begins drinking with the expectation that he or she will become an alcohol abuser, yet every year millions develop dependency on alcohol. The best way to make sure that one does not put himself at risk of such abuse is to never drink alcohol recreationally or socially.

The numerous documented adverse effects of alcohol on the human anatomy should be sufficient reason to abstain from alcohol use. But the Christian has another important reason for abstaining from alcohol. Paul taught that the Christian’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It houses God’s Spirit (1 Cor 6:19–20). Consequently, whatever we do to our bodies affects directly the dwelling of God’s Spirit. Out of respect for God the Christian should do all he can to engage only in activity that honors and strengthens his body. His body and mind should be available to the indwelling Holy Spirit at any time and should be under the Spirit’s control, not that of alcohol (Eph 5:18).

VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we offer five general principles that the Christian would do well to follow when he is making a decision about alcohol use or any other activity. First, the lordship of Christ takes priority. Christians are not free to do anything they please. They belong to Christ and should make every effort to engage in behavior that honors his lordship over their lives. Paul provides the definitive expression of this principle: “For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20). Second, selfishness should be shunned. Selfishness is the

¹⁶ “Think Responsibly,” *The Monday Morning Report*, January 14, 2008, 1.

¹⁷ Centers for Disease Control, <http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/faqs.htm>, February 3, 2008.

root of all sin. It leads people to seek their own interests, even to the detriment of others. The biblical guidance is clear: "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor" (1 Cor 10:24). Third, sacrifice is a Christian virtue. The needs of others must overrule our own exercise of freedom. Paul taught, "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor 8:9). Someone might say that the weaker person is the one with the problem and that stronger Christians should not allow weaker ones to impose standards on them that God has not required. Paul does not qualify his statement, however. In fact, he exaggerates this principle of sacrifice for the weaker Christian, declaring, "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). Jesus provides the supreme example of such a sacrificial mentality. He recognized the human need for forgiveness and willingly gave up his rightful place in heaven, took on human flesh, and sacrificed his life on the cross for the sake of others. We are not saying that it is not the right of Christians to drink alcohol if they choose to do so. We are saying that Christians should not consider that their rights are more important than their responsibilities to live in such a way that their fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord are not offended.

We recognize that this is not always practicable. Christian legalism, for example, may become so demanding that it creates an unrealistic intrusion into the lives of other Christians. When this occurs, Christians should not feel bound to accommodate these expectations. For some, the issue of alcohol use is such an intrusion, but we ask how the Christian is harmed or his spiritual liberty is hindered if he abstains from drinking alcohol for the sake of his fellow believers? Alcohol consumption is not the same as some other activities legalistic Christians might expect others to give up. Alcohol is a dangerous drug which has and continues to devastate millions of people. When one refrains from drinking alcohol, he is avoiding an activity that is not only offensive to some, but that is deadly to many. This seems to us to be an appropriate application of the principle of sacrifice.

Fourth, God's glory should be the most important concern for Christians. With every activity, the Christian should ask whether or not God will be glorified. Paul summarized, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). We ask any Christian who chooses to drink alcohol whether God is glorified more by the one who drinks or by the one who abstains. Considering the principles we have already laid out, it seems obvious to us that God is glorified most by the Christian who abstains. There is no glory for God in the willful pursuit of pleasure that has no regard for one's influence or effect on others.

Finally, the Christian must remember that he will be judged for his every deed, both those that affect his own life and those that affect the lives of others. Paul counsels, "But if we judged ourselves rightly, we

would not be judged” (1 Cor 11:31). Whether in this life or the life to come, God will hold Christians accountable for their behavior. It does not even matter whether or not we believe we are justified to engage in certain activities. The real question is whether or not God thinks we are. Given the current problems alcohol is causing in our culture, the potential that our drinking has in influencing others to drink, and the many health problems associated with alcohol, it is inconceivable that God considers recreational or social drinking to be the best choice a committed Christian can make. Every Christian should live to hear his Lord declare, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” throughout each day of his life and ultimately on that final day of judgment which awaits us all.

We have supported these five principles with passages from one book of the Bible, Paul’s first letter to the Christians at Corinth. It should not come as a surprise that so many principles for spiritual decision-making would be found in this letter. The church at Corinth was evidently one of the most carnal and immature fellowships of Christians with whom Paul had to deal. This is unfortunate, but not unexpected. The culture in Corinth was one of the most debased in the Roman Empire. It was so bad that the term “Corinthianized” became the word of choice throughout much of the Roman Empire to describe someone who had fallen into the darkest depths of immoral behavior. Unfortunately, some of the Christians who came out of that cultural morass brought their “liberated” mindset into the church in Corinth. Paul’s extant letters to that church reveal the extent of the problem their attitudes were causing. Paul found it necessary to counsel the Christians who had escaped the immorality of their debauched culture to “be imitators” of him (1 Cor. 4:16). He also shared many principles for faithful living with them. American Christians find themselves currently in the midst of an increasingly secular and immoral culture—a culture devastated by alcohol abuse. Today’s Christians run the same risks that they too will become influenced by a mindset too fixed on personal pleasure and liberty. We would do well to follow Paul’s counsel as well and apply the principles he shared with our Christian counterparts nearly 2,000 years ago.