

Fulton County Gospel News

Good News About Christ And His Church For All Of The World

“... Christ is the head of the church: and He is the Savior of the body.” - Ephesians 5:23

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A BIBLICAL LOOK AT “SOCIAL DRINKING”

Part Two

by Lee Moses

Last month, we began an examination of “social drinking,” the consumption of alcoholic beverages in relatively moderate amounts, in light of the facts. It was seen that although moderate drinking may be better than excessive drinking in some respects, Scriptural principles forbid recreational drinking of alcoholic beverages in any quantity. This month, we will consider two additional arguments advanced in behalf of “social drinking.”

The “Social Custom” Argument

One argument made in behalf of social drinking appeals to the different viewpoints held by different cultures with regard to alcoholic beverages. In some cultures, there is no stigma whatsoever attached to drinking alcoholic beverages. In fact, there is a stigma attached to **abstaining** from drinking. Particularly if one is a guest in another’s home, he is expected to join in the merriment when a toast is made or whenever a drink is offered. To refuse is considered a great insult. People in such cultures view a teetotaler as strange to say the least, and quite possibly as standoffish and rude. So, apologists reason, social customs within a particular culture may allow or even demand that a Christian participate in drinking beverage alcohol.

However, custom does not supersede the word of God. Even civil **law** does not supersede the word of God (Acts 4:12; 5:29). As noted in last month’s article, the word of God forbids

drunkenness to any extent, which would include the first sip of alcohol (1 Corinthians 6:10; Ephesians 5:18; Proverbs 23:31). Drinking alcoholic beverages is not part of being “*wise as serpents, and harmless as doves,*” nor of becoming “*all things to all men*”—it is part of the “*works of the flesh,*” and “*they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God*” (Galatians 5:21).

Perhaps a Christian may stick out like a sore thumb in some settings because of his refusal to partake in the revelries in which others partake. When someone becomes a Christian, he is **not supposed** to blend in with the world around him:

*That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: **Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you** (1 Peter 4:2-4, emphasis LM).*

Do those who engage in the aforementioned activities view **your** behavior as strange? If not, something may well be very wrong. A Christian is supposed to **confront** culture, not merely reflect the same image. A Christian is supposed to

be a light shining in darkness:

Be not ye therefore partakers with them [the children of disobedience, LM]. For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them (Ephesians 5:7-11).

Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

Unfortunately, some fail to shine in the darkness because they hide their light under a wine glass or beer bottle.

By refusing to participate in “social drinking,” a Christian may displease someone. Oftentimes a person becomes angry and upset when first told that he is doing wrong. However, that displeasure may be the necessary impetus to self-examination in the light of God’s word (2 Samuel 12:5, 13; Acts 2:37; 2 Corinthians 7:8-11). No one can be truly converted who is never shown that his sins are sinful. Wrong living can never show anyone what is right.

The social customs of a particular culture may place strong pressure upon citizens and visitors alike to conform. Even mighty King Saul gave into the pressure of the people: “*And Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned: for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD, and thy words: because I feared*

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the people, and obeyed their voice" (1 Samuel 15:24). When he gave in, he sinned against the Lord. But as strong as the pressure might be, no one has to give in and sin against the Lord to "fit in" with others. Consider the culture in which Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah found themselves. They were taken from their homeland and placed into a culture that demanded actions they knew to be wrong. Even the law demanded that they do what was wrong before God. Thus, "Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank: therefore he requested of the prince of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself" (Daniel 1:8). His three friends must have similarly purposed in their hearts, for they refused to conform to the culture even if it meant their deaths (3:18). Likewise, a Christian must purpose in his heart that he will not defile himself with alcoholic beverages, regardless of the social customs of the culture in which he finds himself.

"Jesus Turned Water into Wine"

If there is one favorite "sugarstick" Bible passage of social drinkers, it would have to be John 2:1-11. This passage speaks of Christ's first miracle, in which He turned water into wine at a marriage in Cana of Galilee. The reasoning is simple: If Jesus provided an alcoholic beverage at this marriage, then He condoned the recreational use of alcoholic beverages. And, obviously, if Jesus condoned the recreational use of alcoholic beverages, then the recreational use of alcoholic beverages is permitted, at least in some quantity. However, this argument falls flat because its major premise is false—Jesus most certainly did **not** provide an alcoholic beverage at the marriage recorded in John 2:1-11.

"Wine" As It Is Used in the Bible

When modern English-speaking people hear the word "wine," they immediately envision an intoxicating beverage. However, ancient Hebrew and Greek, the original languages of the Bible, used the same words to refer to intoxicating wine and to non-intoxicating wine, to fermented wine and to **unfermented grape juice**.

The two daughters of Lot conspired to intoxicate and deceive their father, saying, "Come, let us make our father drink wine" (Genesis 19:32). This word (Hebrew *yayin*) is by far the most common word in the Bible for wine, in this context clearly referring to intoxicating fermented wine. However, the Bible elsewhere uses the same word to refer to non-intoxicating wine: "The treaders shall tread out no wine in their presses" (Isaiah 16:10; compare with Jeremiah 48:33). When the grapes are first pressed, the must that comes forth has not begun the process of fermentation—yet the Bible calls it *wine*. Governor Gedaliah told the people of Judah, "gather ye wine, and summer fruits, and oil, and put them in your vessels" (Jeremiah 48:10), which they also did (verse 12). Thus, even the grapes on the vine are called wine.

Other words translated *wine* can similarly refer to non-intoxicating grape juice. Isaiah 27:2 speaks of "[a] vine-

yard of red wine" (Hebrew *chemer*). Surely this "wine" that is still in the vineyard could not intoxicate anyone. Joel prophesied, "The field is wasted, the land mourneth; for the corn is wasted: the new wine (Hebrew *tiyrōsh*) is dried up, the oil languisheth? (1:10). The term *new wine* refers to fresh grape juice that has not begun to ferment, made all the clearer by its portrayal here of never having left the vine; as with Isaiah 65:8: "As the new wine is found in the cluster . . ." The Israelites of the restoration vowed to bring an offering into the temple: "For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the corn, of the **new wine**, and the oil, unto the chambers, where are the vessels of the sanctuary, and the priests that minister, and the porters, and the singers: and we will not forsake the house of our God" (Nehemiah 10:39, emphasis LM). Again, *new wine* refers to grape juice that has not yet fermented, and since it was to be brought into the temple it could not be **allowed** to ferment—the priests could have neither "wine nor strong drink" when in the temple (Leviticus 10:9).

Some insist that Bible references to wine must refer exclusively to intoxicating wine because, they claim, grape juice would ferment too quickly to preserve unfermented. They voice skepticism as to whether ancient inhabitants of Palestine had the ability to prevent fermentation. Such skeptics might be better served to ask whether the ancients had the ability to **produce** proper fermentation.

Fermenting wine is a science. There are four factors essential to fermentation:

(1) There must be both sugar matter and yeast.¹

(2) The temperature should not be below 50° nor above 70 or 75°.²

(3) The juice must be of a certain consistency. Thick syrup will not undergo fermentation. An excess of sugar is unfavorable to this process. Too little sugar or too much water will be deficient to produce a liquor that will keep.³ The particularly sweet grapes of Palestine would not lend themselves to

fermentation: “Due to the high sugar content, grape juice from these grapes does not ferment well *naturally*.”⁴

(4) The amount of yeast must also be well regulated. Too much or too little will impede and prevent fermentation.⁵ Modern winemakers know that the right yeast must be added for proper fermentation. Grapes from the vineyard usually only have low-alcohol-tolerant yeasts. “[G]ood, alcohol-tolerant wine yeasts ‘are inhabitants of wineries, not grapes on the vine.’”⁶

Without these factors in place, wine will not ferment. Even the fermented wine of which the Bible speaks would not have had comparable intoxicating properties to wine commonly found today:

The distillation process whereby extra alcoholic potency is artificially applied to modern wines was not discovered until between the ninth to the eleventh centuries A.D.—long after the biblical periods closed. Alcoholic wine of the potency of modern wines was not available in biblical times!⁷

As the ancients often found sweet, unfermented wine preferable, they could take and did take steps to prevent fermentation. They could seal the grape juice in an airtight vessel, boil the juice down, or filter the gluten or yeast—any of these would prevent fermentation.⁸

In the centuries before Christ, it became common to dilute wine with water. Second Maccabees 15:39 calls undiluted wine “hurtful,” or “distasteful”;⁹ yet says, “wine mingled with water is pleasant, and delighteth the taste.” In the following centuries, such dilution became taken for granted, and rabbinical writing forbade saying a blessing over undiluted wine.¹⁰

The New Testament refers to wine almost exclusively with the Greek word *oinos*. Ancient Greek did have a specific word for unfermented grape juice (*trux*)¹¹; however, this word is nowhere found in the New Testament or in contemporary literature written in Greek. It seems to have been an obsolete word by the time the New Testament

was written, and quite possibly by the time the Old Testament was translated into Greek in the third to second centuries B.C. Nonetheless, *oinos* encompasses the vast range of *wine* known to the ancients. *Oinos* is defined primarily as “a beverage made from fermented juice of the grape,” yet it can go as far as meaning “the plant that makes the production of wine possible.”¹² Thus, it “comprehend[s] every sort of wine,”¹³ including “must, new wine.”¹⁴ This is the word that describes the *wine* the Lord transformed from water in John 2:1-11.

Considering all this, when one encounters the word *wine* in the Biblical text, he must let context dictate which meaning is intended—intoxicating or non-intoxicating.

Christ's Nature and Mission

When one considers Christ's nature and mission, it is all the more astounding that some attempt to justify “social drinking” by His first miracle at Cana. His nature and mission simply do not comport with the notion of His providing an intoxicating beverage at this marriage feast.

First, consider the quantity of the wine that Jesus provided. The Biblical record states that He filled six waterpots containing two or three firkins apiece (John 2:6). The six waterpots together provided a minimum of 108 gallons up to **162 gallons of wine**.¹⁵ Consider what a great quantity this is. For argument's sake, assume He provided the lower number (although He obviously provided more). There are 15 1/2 gallons in one keg, so He would have provided approximately **seven kegs** of wine—would He have provided this much intoxicating wine? And this for a group that had already “*well drunk*” (“*drunk freely*,” American Standard Version), and finished all the wine that the host had thought sufficient? (John 2:10, 3). No longer are we looking at justification for drinking only in moderate amounts. If Jesus provided intoxicating wine at this feast, He justified drinking oneself into oblivion.

Was Jesus such a man? Jesus may not have been bound under the Naziritic

oath that John the baptizer was, forbidding **any** consumption of the grape (Numbers 6:3; Luke 1:15 [according to Lightfoot, this prohibition forbade John from drinking old wine **and new wine**¹⁶]; compare with 7:32-34). However, Jesus **was** bound under the Old Testament of Moses (Matthew 5:17; Galatians 4:4). The Old Testament condemned drunkenness (as does the New Testament), and it condemned those who provided the drink that made others drunken: “*Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and maketh him drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness!*” (Habakkuk 2:15). Jesus Christ certainly was **not** such a man—He “*knew no sin*” (2 Corinthians 5:21); He “*did no sin*” (1 Peter 2:22); He was “*without blemish and without spot*” at His death (1:19); “*in him is no sin*” (1 John 3:5); He is “*without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15); He is “*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens*”! (7:26).

How would providing such a quantity of intoxicating beverage comport with Christ's mission on the earth? Christ was sent to earth “*to preach the kingdom of God*” (Luke 4:43), and He came “*to seek and to save that which was lost*” (19:10). Really, He accomplished both jointly—He sought and saved the lost by preaching and preparing for the then imminent kingdom of God, the church (Mark 1:14-15; Acts 2:41, 47). Yet, if He provided intoxicating wine at the marriage in Cana, He **hindered** the guests from entering into the kingdom of God and receiving the salvation of their souls. As Paul wrote,

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, emphases LM).

If Jesus provided intoxicating wine, especially in such large quantity, He worked against His own mission. Instead of calling people to righteousness and the kingdom, He would have called them to drunkenness and away from the inheritance of the kingdom. But Jesus would do no such thing. He observed that Satan would not be so foolish as to work against his own diabolical mission (Mark 3:23-26)—Christ undoubtedly was not so foolish as to work against His holy and Divine mission.

No, Jesus did not provide an intoxicating beverage at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee. This wonderful and pure miracle of Jesus “*manifested forth his glory,*” not temptation and debauchery (verse 11). John 2:1-11 serves as no justification whatsoever for “social drinking.”

To be continued next month

1 William Patton, *Bible Wines* (Fort Worth, TX: Star Bible Publications, n.d.), p. 14.
 2 Ibid., pp. 14-15.
 3 Ibid.
 4 Louis Rushmore, *Beverage Alcohol* (Cameron, WV: Louis Rushmore, 2007 revision), p. 21.
 5 Patton, pp. 14-15.
 6 Jeff Cox, *From Vines to Wines: The Complete Guide to Growing Grapes and Making Your Own Wine* (Pownal, VT: Storey Books, 1999), p. 133; citing an unidentified scientist.
 7 Rushmore, p. 21.
 8 Patton, pp. 21-31.
 9 Burton Scott Easton, “Wine, Winepress,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980 printing), 4:3087.
 10 Ibid.
 11 *Oinos*, in Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 701.
 12 Ibid.
 13 John McClintock and James Strong, “Wine,” in *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), 10:1014; quoted in Jerry Moffitt, “Did Jesus Allow or Encourage Social Drinking of Intoxicants?” in *Studies in John*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Publications, 1999), p. 624.
 14 Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1970), p. 442; quoted by Moffitt.
 15 “Firkin,” *ISBE*, 2:1113.
 16 John Lightfoot, *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003 printing), 3:18-19.

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GOD’S AUTHORIZED WORSHIP

- COLOSSIANS 3:17

1. **LORD’S SUPPER** - The New Testament and early church history record that Christians met on the first day of every week (Sunday) to worship God and remember Christ (Acts 20:7; I Corinthians 11:23-34; 16: 1-2).
2. **PRAYERS** - (Acts 2:42; Philippians 4:6-7; I Thessalonians 5:17-18).
3. **SINGING** - God’s word authorizes only vocal music and specifically singing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12). The New Testament shows no use of mechanical instruments of music in worship to God by the church Christ established. Church history notes no such use for nearly 700 years after the New Testament was completed. It is an innovation of men, not of God.
4. **GIVING** - Free-willed, cheerful, generous, and every week (Acts 20:35; I Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8 & 9).
5. **PREACHING OF THE WORD** - The gospel of Christ, not men’s doctrines nor entertainment, saves and strengthens us (Acts 2:42; 20:7; Romans 10:17; I Corinthians 1:18-23).

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