

## WINE AND THE DISCIPLE

*Cecil Hook*

Wine was a common commodity in ancient life, being mentioned over 250 times in the Bible. All of the wine was not used by bad people. Because of prejudicial notions which are held and expressed so strongly, it has been difficult to bring an objective lesson on the use of wine. For many, the only use of wine is no use, and those people usually question the motives of anyone who justifies any use of wine, often accusing him of being a drunkard or condoning drunkenness.

We should be candid in our investigation of the subject. We gain nothing by being evasive, illogical, inconsistent, or dishonest about it. An incident in a Vacation Bible School class which I once taught in a neighboring congregation illustrates our evasive approach. We were studying this subject. To warn against use of wine, a kind and lovable elder of advanced age read Proverbs 31:5: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted." After he made his point, a young woman inquired sincerely and respectfully, "What do the next two verses mean?" So he read: "Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more." Having never considered that there was a proper use for wine, he became confused and embarrassed, and he was unable to give a coherent answer. He did not help his case by ignoring those passages. And he was not the first to do so.

We will review some of the teachings in the Old Testament writings about wine. The first mention of wine tells about Noah who "planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk ..." (Gen. 9:20f). Other liquors are not mentioned in the Bible, but they are referred to as strong drink. Methods of making distilled liquor had not been invented. Spiced wine was called "mixed wine." Noah got the drinking of wine off to a bad start.

Plenty of wine indicated prosperity and blessing. "May God give you ... plenty of grain and wine" was the blessing of Isaac upon Jacob (Gen. 27:28; see Deut. 7:13; Amos 9:14). When David said, "My cup runneth over," it is not likely that he was referring to goat milk!

Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, brought bread and wine to offer Abraham when he returned from battle (Gen. 14:18).

A part of the Levitical priests' portion was the best of the vintage (Num. 18: 12). The priests were to offer upon the altar day after day the fourth part of a hin of wine for a drink offering (Exo. 29:38f). (A hin was about 6-1/2 pints.)

The people were to tithe their wine along with their other produce (Deut. 14:23).

Levites had charge of the stored wine at the Tabernacle (1 Chron. 9:29).

"Say to the people of Israel, When either a man or a woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazarite, to separate himself to the Lord, he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar made from wine or strong drink, and shall not drink any juice of grapes or eat grapes, fresh or dried" (Num. 6:2f). Such abstinence from grapes and wine was not required of all persons. After the Nazarite had fulfilled the vow, "the Nazarite may drink wine" (v. 20).

Priests were forbidden to drink while in service: "Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die" (Lev. 10:8f).

The references above show that there was a proper and approved use of wine that holy men of old could enjoy. There are many warnings given against drunkenness, and there are ugly scenes involving strong drink. We are so familiar with those that it is superfluous to recite them here. But to incriminate righteous men and holy institutions in their use of wine because of the abuse that sinful, intemperate men displayed is unjust and slanderous.

Looking into the New Testament writings, we observe that the same attitude toward wine prevailed. For the moment, we will pass over all the many references which warn that a drunkard definitely will not inherit the Kingdom of God. Let us consider the attitude that Jesus and Paul had toward the use of wine. They were by no means total abstainers.

Jesus used an illustration that the Jews understood readily when he talked about putting new wine in old wine-skins. The juice expands only while fermenting. If fermenting juice was considered sinful to them, his illustration would have had an evil connotation to them.

At a wedding feast, Jesus performed his first miracle by turning water into wine (John 2:1f). In fact, he made about 108 gallons of it! And it was for social drinking! Was it just fresh grape juice? If any use of alcoholic drink was sinful, surely Jesus would have clarified that point then and there. Are we to say that the Holy Spirit made a bad choice of words which would easily lead people into a misinterpretation that encourages sin? I think not.

Vacuum seal bottles are a modern invention. They had no means for keeping fresh grape juice, but by fermenting it, they could keep it as wine. I have read some fantastic claims that the Jews had some means of preserving "unfermented wine." If they could do it, why can't we? If someone will demonstrate that grape juice can be kept in any desirable state for drinking from summer until Passover the next spring without the benefit of cold, vacuum seal, or fermentation, he will have a plausible argument. To say that they drank diluted wine does not meet the issue for, whether it be 2% or 16% alcohol, it still would be alcoholic. New/sweet wine was alcoholic (Acts 2:12).

Jesus drank wine in contrast to John's abstinence: "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of man has come eating and drinking; and you say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard...!' " (Luke 7:33f). If he drank fresh grape juice only, would they have accused him of being a drunkard, or winebibber?

In his parable, Jesus pictured the Samaritan as pouring oil and wine on the wounds of a man for medicinal purposes. Oil and grape juice?

In initiating the Lord's Supper, Jesus used the cup which was a part of the Passover meal (Luke 22:14f). It was too early in the spring for fresh grape juice. Following the pattern of Jesus and the apostles, the Corinthian disciples still had a meal as the setting for their Lord's Supper. Abuse of the meal resulted in the drunkenness of some: "For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" (1 Cor. 11:21). It was fermented. Even though some got drunk, Paul did not forbid that any of them drink. He said that they had homes to do it in.

Even though Paul says that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking" (Rom. 14:17), many today would contradict him in maintaining that one who drinks cannot remain in the kingdom.

In defending the personal rights of Barnabas and himself, Paul asked the rhetorical question, "Have we no right to eat and to drink?" (1 Cor. 9:4). Paul declared, "It is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble" (Rom. 14:21). But he did not indicate that no one could properly eat meat or drink wine forevermore. Abstinence was considered to be needful only when someone's faith would be jeopardized. In similar setting, Paul indicates that a person might glorify God in his drinking: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

At Miletus, Paul had warned the Ephesian elders that some of their number would become divisive. Later, Timothy was instructed to expose and publicly rebuke those elders. That was quite a task for the young evangelist--enough to keep his nervous stomach in turmoil! So, Paul prescribed a tranquilizer for him, urging, "Use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and for your frequent ailments" (1 Tim. 5:23). That is the use suggested for wine in Proverbs 31:6f. That is the same use we make of sedatives and tranquilizers today. It served them as a pain reliever. I have seen many persons on their death bed and, almost without exception, they were heavily sedated. For me to suggest that these good people died in a drunken stupor would be horrifying, but what is the difference in having senses dulled by alcohol or by some other chemical? These are in the realm of our liberty.

Is wine sinful? Sin is not in things, but in people. "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself ..." (Rom. 14:14). "To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted" (Titus 1:15).

The use of wine is a liberty of the disciple; however, this and all other liberties are limited by self-control and by expediency. Paul expressed it in this manner: "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be enslaved by anything" (1 Cor. 6:12). Let us consider these limitations further.

By intemperance, we may become enslaved to most any good thing, whether it be coffee, cola, sweets, sports, television, peer pressure, or wine. It is the loss of self-control that is sinful rather than the thing which is submitted to. The passages of scripture usually reviewed in support of abstinence all condemn the enslavement--drunkenness--rather than a temperate use of alcohol. Thus, Paul assures us that those who practice drunkenness shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:21). He even warns us not to associate with a brother who is a drunkard (1 Cor. 5:11). "Do not get drunk with wine," he demands (Eph. 5:18). The elder is to be no drunkard, nor should the deacon be addicted to wine (1 Tim. 3:3,8).

Some sincere people contend that any amount of drinking makes one drunk proportionately; that is, if you have one drink and it takes two drinks to make you intoxicated, then you are one-half drunk. By the same rule, if eating two steaks would make you sick and gluttonous, then one steak would make you half a glutton, and driving thirty miles an hour would make you half a violater of law.

Drinking wine, or any other practice, is not expedient or helpful if it causes someone else to sin. Concern for the weak brother constrained Paul to declare, "It is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble" (Rom. 14:21), and "Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor. 8:9). Cause the weak to stumble, not the pious to grumble! Were the righteous men throughout Bible history who drank wine stumbling blocks or bad influences? Surely, concern for the weak did not take away liberty after the weak had been instructed and strengthened.

It is commonly urged that it is not expedient to drink any wine because it can become habit forming so easily. I respect that argument and the person who chooses to drink none. Some persons, because of their physical and

psychological nature, must avoid all alcohol because they are alcoholics by nature even if not by practice. But most any good thing can lead to sin if we do not exercise self-control, whether it be eating, sleeping, talking, driving, taking sedatives, watching television, or most any other activity within our liberties. We cannot abstain from life!

"You lose your influence with others when you drink." It is true that pious and judgmental persons will think less of you because you do not adhere to their scruples. Most unchurched people attach no stigma to you for moderate use of alcohol. The jibes we hear from them come when they see people drink who have so piously contended against it. They laugh at our hypocrisy, whether it relates to the use of alcohol, or anything else. The Protestant fundamentalists are the only Christian groups who have demanded total abstinence.

A factor of our modern times must be considered in determining expediency. Our mechanical age makes use of alcohol more dangerous for such activities as driving an automobile, operating heavy equipment, or performing work which demands finer precision and quicker reflexes.

his brief treatise does not touch on all areas relating to the use of wine. Usually, one who makes any defense of our Christian liberty is considered to be the Devil's advocate; hence, we do not hear many lessons about it or see preachers' names signed to any discussions of it. To preach on it is to commit suicide in the pulpit! The righteous spokesmen for God of old would be barred from our pulpits for repeating what they wrote on the subject, and Jesus would be thrown out of the church if he made wine there or drank it at a wedding reception in the fellowship room. (*Free To Speak*, Chapter 8).