

Drinking Intoxicating Beverages

By: Allan McNabb

The other day, a few teenagers asked me about drinking. Why isn't it okay for adults to take a sip of alcohol — they won't get drunk — what if no one sees them do it?

Since teenagers originally asked me about drinking alcohol, I've written this article to make these points meaningful to them.

Important Questions

Questions about drinking and intoxication are very important, especially for young people and new Christians, trying to learn God's word and please Him in every respect.

Answering these questions are important because they involve our souls. If we answer them correctly and obey God, we can be saved. But if we answer them incorrectly and disobey God, we'll be lost.

It's also important to answer these questions because alcohol destroys lives. A quick Internet search for "first drink" and "drunk driver" pulls up heart wrenching stories of loved ones who lost family and friends to drunk drivers. These stories often display messages like, "If you never take the first drink, you'll never kill someone as a drunk driver!"

Sinfulness of Intoxication

Intoxication is a sin (Rom. 13:13; Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Pet. 4:3). It is a deed of darkness (1 Th. 5:7). Therefore, we shouldn't participate in drinking to any degree.

- "For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night" (1 Th. 5:7).
- "Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness" (2 Cor. 6:14)?
- "Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them" (Eph. 5:11).
- "Abstain from every form of evil" (1 Th. 5:22).

Based on these Scriptures, we must conclude that Christians should stay away from every form of drinking and intoxication. We shouldn't drink alcohol, not even a sip.

Intoxication Results In More Sin

Studies show that a person is impaired with one beer, or four ounces of table wine, or a mild mixed drink. The only way to avoid impairment is not drink (Blood Alcohol Calculator, The Police Notebook, Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, <http://www.ou.edu/oupd/bac.htm>).

In other words, intoxication and drunkenness begins with the first drink.

Not only is intoxication sinful, it results in other sins, bringing sadness and despair into the lives of people who drink.

- **Pr. 4:17** Wine figuratively represents wickedness.
- **Pr. 20:1** "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise."

- **Is. 5:11-12** People involved in drinking aren't mindful of God.
- **Is. 5:22-23** People involved in drinking involve themselves in wickedness.
- **Is. 24:9; Ezek. 23:33** Drinking results in sadness.
- **Is. 19:14; 28:7; 56:12** Drinking results in impaired judgment.
- **Matt. 24:48-49** Drinking and drunkenness in the parable of the evil slave relate to sin.
- **Rev. 14:8** Drinking wine figuratively represents immorality, in Revelation.

In the Old Testament, we have two very poignant examples of sin connected to drunkenness.

- **Gen. 19:32-35** Lot's daughters got him drunk with wine to coerce him into committing incest.
- **2 Sam. 11:13** David purposely got Uriah drunk, trying to coerce him into doing something he didn't want to do.

Drinking Parties

It's a sin to go to a drinking party, whether or not you drink.

- "For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries" (1 Pet. 4:3).

The word "carousing" in 1 Peter 4:3, also translated revellings, is the wild parties where there is drinking. A frat party is an example of this type of party, where people drink massive quantities of alcohol.

The phrase "drinking parties" in 1 Peter 4:3, also translated banqueting, denotes the milder parties where people assemble to drink. A cocktail party is an example of this type of party, which is usually calm compared to a frat party.

It's A Sin To Go To The Party

Sometimes I'm asked a question like, "Is it okay to go to the party, if I don't drink?"

The answer is no. Peter tells us it's a sin to go to drinking parties, whether we drink or not.

Christians don't participate in the deeds of darkness, exposing them as sinful (2 Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:11). Therefore, we must stay away from drinking parties, and all the sin associated with them (1 Pet. 4:3).

Drinking Alcohol Is Harmful

As Christians, we must take care of our bodies.

- "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

From a common sense perspective, we know drinking alcohol is harmful by observing that doctors order pregnant women and nursing mothers not to drink, because it harms their babies.

From a technical perspective, we also see that drinking is harmful to our bodies.

- “When an alcoholic beverage is consumed, ethanol is absorbed in the bloodstream, depressing the central nervous system and altering the function of cells and organs throughout the body” (Canadian Health Network, article prepared by the Centre for Addictions Research of B.C.).
- “Approximately 20% of ethanol is absorbed into the bloodstream directly from the stomach, and 80% from the small intestine” (Alcoholic Intoxication, eMedicineHealth, http://www.emedicinehealth.com/alcohol_intoxication/article_em.htm).

Drinking Ethanol

After reading the above quotes, you may wonder if the ethanol in an alcoholic beverage is the same ethanol in gasoline. The answer is yes.

One way of producing ethanol is through fermentation.

- “Ethanol fermentation is the biological process by which sugars such as glucose, fructose, and sucrose, are converted into ethanol and carbon dioxide. Yeasts carry out ethanol fermentation on sugars in the absence of oxygen. . . . Ethanol fermentation is responsible for the rising of bread dough, the production of ethanol in alcoholic beverages, and for much of the production of ethanol for use as fuel” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethanol_fermentation).

“A standard ‘drink’ of ethanol consists of 10 grams. This amount is equal to 10 ounces (300 cc) of regular beer (5% alcohol content); 3-4 ounces of wine (12% alcohol content); or 1 ounce of hard liquor (40% alcohol content, 80 ‘proof’) (Alcoholic Intoxication, eMedicineHealth, http://www.emedicinehealth.com/alcohol_intoxication/article_em.htm).

Drinking Alcohol is Harmful

When a person drinks a modern alcoholic beverage, he is harming his body with the same chemical in gasoline — ethanol.

As Christians, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we are responsible for glorifying God in our bodies. Harming our bodies with alcohol is a sin. And going to drinking parties where people are assembled for that purpose is a sin.

Wine in the Bible

There is much debate over wine in the Bible. Some people believe some wine was unfermented grape juice, without any alcohol. And others believe all wine in the Bible was fermented, and had alcohol.

Frankly, it’s difficult to nail down absolute specifics about New Testament wine, but there are a few general things we know that are helpful.

Fermentation: A Method of Preserving Wine

Researchers suggest that ancient societies had numerous ways of preserving the fruit of the vine: boiling, filtering, cooling, adding preservatives, and fermentation.

Fermentation is a naturally occurring process that results in a low-level alcohol content, and preserves the juice.

In Palestine, the fermentation process began almost immediately. But the juice wasn't considered wine until fermenting forty days (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia).

Three Greek Words Translated "Wine"

There are three words translated "wine" in the New Testament.

Oinos "is the general word for 'wine.' The mention of the bursting of the wineskins, Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37, implies fermentation" (Vine's Dictionary).

- Since the juice was fermented, it had an alcohol content. Typically the alcohol content of first century wine was 2-3%, perhaps reaching as high as 5%.
 - The alcohol level of first century wine was about the same as low-alcohol, twenty-first century cider.
 - The alcohol level of present-day wine in the United States ranges from 11-14%.
 - Modern wine has a significantly higher alcohol content than first century wine, as much as 600%. (Note: Some modern wines have alcohol added to them to make them more intoxicating.)
- In the first century, wine was diluted with water, significantly reducing the alcohol level.
 - In Revelation 14:10, John uses a phrase associated with mixing wine with water. He says the wine of God's wrath is "prepared unmixed" (ASV). The Greek here is "used of wine unmixed with water (usually so mixed)" (Robertson).
 - Also from the Jewish Mishna, we learn that water was added to wine to dilute it. "The proportion of water was large, only one-third or one-fourth of the total mixture being wine" (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia).
 - The alcohol content of wine, after it was diluted with water, was about 1%.

Gleukos is translated "new wine" and "sweet wine," appearing only in Acts 2:13, where the apostles were accused of being drunk with new wine.

- New wine is "juice of the grape which distills before a pressure is applied, and called *must*" (Barnes' Notes). It was very intoxicating.

Oxos is translated "sour wine" and "vinegar." It was "the ordinary drink of laborers and common soldiers" (Vine's). It was given to Jesus by Roman soldiers before He died.

- Vinegar was mixed with other foods, and sometimes used as a condiment. It was mixed with water to create a cheap drink.
- Typically, vinegar does not contain alcohol.

Alcoholic Beverages From a New Testament Perspective

When we talk about alcoholic beverages from a New Testament perspective, we must understand that the wine (*oinos*) of their day was much weaker than twenty-first century wine. Then, they made it even weaker by adding water, resulting in about 1% alcohol, which was only intoxicating in very large quantities.

Intoxicating beverages with higher alcohol content were considered liquor (strong drink, Lk. 1:15). These beverages had ingredients added to them, to make them more intoxicating.

If we try and compare New Testament wine, after it was mixed with water, to something in the twenty-first century, we could compare it with non-alcoholic wine, which is about 0.5% alcohol.

Scriptures Erroneously Used To Justify Drinking

Jesus Turned Water To Wine

Some people argue that it's okay to drink alcoholic beverages, based on the fact that Jesus made wine at a marriage feast in Cana (John 2:1-11).

Other people believe Jesus wouldn't have made alcoholic wine, because it would be a sin to contribute to drunkenness. They believe Jesus made grape juice, rather than alcoholic wine. But the fact is, we don't know whether the wine was fermented or unfermented, or whether it had alcohol.

For the sake of argument, let's say the wine (Greek, *oinos*) Jesus made was naturally fermented for at least forty days, according to tradition:

- If it was fermented wine with an alcohol content, **it would be mixed with water**, as we've already learned. Notice that Jesus had the servants take the wine to the headwaiter (Jn. 2:8), whose traditional job was to taste the wine and mix it with the appropriate amount of water before serving it.
- If it was fermented wine, mixed with water, it would have an alcohol content of about 1%, making it **comparable to our non-alcoholic wine** today.

From Jesus turning water to wine, twenty-first century Christians can conclude it's lawful to drink grape juice or non-alcoholic wine. We can't conclude it's lawful to drink what's considered to be alcoholic wine, or any other alcoholic beverage.

Use A Little Wine For Your Stomach's Sake

In Paul's first epistle to Timothy, he says, "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Tim. 5:23).

- Remember, wine was **mixed with water**.

Some people use this passage to justify drinking twenty-first century alcoholic wine, and other alcoholic beverages. But when we examine this Scripture, we see that such conclusions are unfounded.

Here are a few things we learn from the context of 1 Timothy 5:23:

- **Timothy wasn't drinking wine** at the time of Paul's writing.
 - Remember, wine was mixed with water.
- Paul told him to **"use" wine**. Timothy's use of wine was **not recreational**, but for the specific purpose of relieving his "frequent ailments."
 - The use of wine was **on par with medicine**, to relieve ailments.
- Paul told him to use a **"little wine,"** not a lot of wine.
 - Traditionally, a very small amount of wine was **mixed with water**, "only one-third or one-fourth of the total mixture being wine" (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia).
 - In Revelation 14:10, **John uses a phrase associated with mixing wine with water**, as we've already discussed.

Now let's apply the principles of 1 Timothy 5:23 to twenty-first century Christians:

- We should **avoid drinking wine**.
- We have good water quality and readily accessible medicine in the USA. There is **no need to "use" wine** for "frequent ailments."

- If people in a particular area of the world need to “use” wine as *medicine* because of poor water or their infirmities, a small amount of low-alcohol wine could be used to relieve their “ailments.”
- The wine Timothy drank, which was mixed with water, **had the alcoholic content of twenty-first century non-alcoholic wine**.

Paul’s command to Timothy does not authorize Christians to drink alcoholic wine, as we think of it in the twenty-first century. At most, it authorizes Christians to drink grape juice and non-alcoholic wine.

Qualifications of Elders and Deacons Don’t Justify Drinking

In giving the qualifications for elders and deacons, Paul says:

- Elders: “not addicted to wine” (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7)
- Deacons: not “addicted to much wine” (1 Tim. 3:8)

Based on these Scriptures, some people think it’s okay to drink wine as long as they’re not addicted to it. But when we investigate the meaning of these Scriptures, we learn that’s not the case (cf. Tit. 2:3).

Elders’ Qualifications

The Greek word (*paroinos*) regarding the qualification of elders is translated differently in various translations:

- “addicted to wine” (NASB)
- “given to wine” (NKJ)
- “brawler” (ASV)

Here Paul is talking about one who is a drunken brawler, a drunk who is engaged in noisy fights or quarrels.

Deacons’ Qualifications

The Greek phrase here regarding the qualification of deacons is translated:

- not “addicted to much wine” (NASB)
- not “given to much wine” (NKJ, ASV)

Robertson’s comment on this phrase gives the meaning: “Not holding the mind (*ton noun* understood as usual with *prosexw*, 1 Timothy 1:4) on much wine (*oinwi*, dative case). That attitude leads to over-indulgence.”

Example: Cooking Wine

Cooking wine is used by many Christians today. Ironically, it has a significantly higher alcohol content than first century wine (*oinos*).

When using cooking wine, the alcohol is cooked out, flavoring the food and resulting in little or no alcohol. This closely corresponds to first century wine, which was diluted with water, leaving a very low alcohol content of about 1%.

If a twenty-first century man improperly uses cooking wine, resulting in intoxication, he would sin and wouldn’t be qualified as an elder or deacon. But as long as the cooking wine is used properly, not resulting in intoxication or any other sin, a man could be qualified.

Similarly, in the first century, people diluted wine with water (Rev. 14:10). As long as a man used wine properly, as commanded by Paul (1 Tim. 5:23), he did not sin and could be qualified to serve as an elder or deacon.

Summary: Qualifications of Elders and Deacons

To be qualified as an elder, a man can't be addicted (given) to wine, and thus engaged in drunken brawling.

To be qualified as a deacon, a man can't have his mind fixed on wine. If he used wine as a first century Christian, he had to do so properly, as commanded by Paul to Timothy, using a "little wine" for his "stomach" and "frequent ailments" (1 Tim. 5:23).

These Qualification Don't Justify Drinking Alcohol Today

In the same epistle in which Paul gives the qualifications for elders and deacons, Paul commands, "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments" (1 Tim. 5:23).

As we've already learned, first century Christians used low-alcohol wine, which they diluted with water before drinking. Using this wine, for the sake of one's stomach and ailments, was lawful. And remember, the alcohol content of the diluted wine was about 1%, making it comparable to twenty-first century non-alcoholic wine.

The qualifications of elders and deacons do not justify drinking alcohol in our culture. At best, they justify drinking grape juice or non-alcoholic wine.

Do Not Get Drunk With Wine

In Ephesians 5:18, Paul says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation. . . ."

Some people contend it's okay to drink wine, as long as they don't get drunk. But upon examining this Scripture, we see that's not true.

"Get drunk" (Eph. 5:18) is translated from the Greek verb *methusko*, meaning "make drunk, or to grow drunk" . . . "to become intoxicated." It's "an inceptive verb, marking the process or the state" (Vine's).

In other words, Paul tells us the process of getting drunk is a sin, in addition to the state of drunkenness.

Getting Drunk Begins With The First Drink

As repeatedly noted in our study, first century wine was diluted with water, and compares to non-alcoholic wine today. Diluted wine in the first century had about 1% alcohol, compared to wine in our culture that has 11-14% alcohol.

We've also learned that a person in our culture is impaired with one beer, or four ounces of table wine, or a **mild mixed drink** (Blood Alcohol Calculator, The Police Notebook, Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, <http://www.ou.edu/oupd/bac.htm>).

With this information, we must conclude that a person begins to get drunk with the first drink, violating the

command in Ephesians 5:18 by drinking one alcoholic drink.

If someone asks if it a sin to drink just one beer or glass of wine, we must answer *yes!*

God Commands Sobriety

“So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober. For those who sleep do their sleeping at night, and those who get drunk get drunk at night. But since we are of the day, let us be sober. . . .” (1 Th. 5:6-8).

As God’s children, we have a responsibility to be “sober in all things” (2 Tim. 4:5). We constantly prepare our minds for action, being sober in spirit, every minute of every day (1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8).

God commands sobriety; therefore, we shouldn’t drink intoxicating beverages, not even one.

Summary

We’ve learned it’s a sin to be intoxicated, concluding we shouldn’t participate in drinking to any degree.

- “Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness” (2 Cor. 6:14)?
- “Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them” (Eph. 5:11).
- “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Th. 5:22).

We’ve learned it’s a sin to go to drinking parties, whether we drink or not.

- “For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries” (1 Pet. 4:3).

We’ve learned that drinking alcohol (ethanol) is sinful, because it harms our bodies.

- “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

We’ve learned Scriptures people use to justify drinking alcohol, don’t justify the behavior. Scriptures such as Jesus making water into wine justify drinking grape juice or non-alcoholic wine, nothing more.

We’ve learned the process of getting drunk is sinful, in addition to the actual state of drunkenness, concluding it’s a sin to drink just one beer or glass of wine.

We’ve learned God commands sobriety; therefore, we shouldn’t drink intoxicating drinks, not even one.

Conclusion

Our purpose in life is to expose the evil deeds of darkness, by abstaining from every form of evil (Eph. 5:11; 1 Th. 5:22).

We don't drink intoxicating beverages. Rather, we expose the sin of intoxication with a steadfast life of sobriety.

Topical Scripture Guide **Drunkenness: Drinking Intoxicating Beverages**

Eph. 5:18 Drunkenness is forbidden (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10; 11:21).

Rom. 13:13 Drunkenness is not a proper walk of life.

1 Cor. 6:9-10 Drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Gal. 5:19-21 Drunkenness is a work of the flesh.

Eph. 5:18-21 Christians should not be drunk with wine but filled with the Spirit.

"Drunk" (Eph. 5:18) is a verb meaning *to be drunk, intoxicated, filled with intoxicating drink*. Therefore, the act of drinking in order to become intoxicated (and not only the state of drunkenness) is forbidden.

1 Cor. 5:11 Christians cannot keep company with other Christians who are drunkards (cf. 1 Cor. 15:33).

1 Pet. 4:3-5 Christians should not participate in drinking parties or carouse in any way.

Christians should avoid parties and social gatherings in which intoxicated beverages are served, and should not engage in "social drinking" of intoxicants.

1 Th. 5:21-22 Christians hold fast to that which is good, and abstain from every form of evil.

Christians do not engage in things associated with sin, including drinking and drunkenness.

1 Cor. 6:12 Christians aren't to be addicted to anything, not even to something good.

Researchers have found that alcohol is very addictive because of its mind-altering properties, and the chemical effect it has on the human brain.