

ALCOHOL
The Christian Faces the Issues
Dr. George O. Wood

We look at the issue of the Christian facing alcohol. I realize as we get into that topic that there are probably many different opinions and involvement represented in this audience this evening. There are some of you who have probably never had an alcoholic drink. And maybe never intend to. There are others of you who have had alcoholic drinks that have chosen never to have another. There are others who have been raised in backgrounds where it was not thought at all to take a drink, a can of beer, a glass of wine. It was simply part of your family culture. Others were raised in home where there was no drinking of any alcoholic beverage at all. Now at some point in your life you got involved in experimenting and maybe doing some social drinking. So you're involved in the practice of perhaps taking alcoholic beverage with a meal. Or periodically having an alcoholic drink. There may be some in the audience who themselves are alcoholics. You recognize at this point in your life you are an alcoholic. Alcoholics often do a very good job of covering their alcoholism. The idea that alcoholics are people who frequent skid row is a myth. That's not the case. There are persons in this audience who believe it is acceptable for Christian persons to drink alcoholic beverages as long as one does not become drunk. There are others who believe that that should not be the case. That Christians ought to be abstainers.

I'm very cognizant and aware of those attitudes are part of the body of Christ today and part and parcel of the Christian community. In talking about the issue of alcohol I'd like to attempt to address it in a sane and sensible kind of way. I have a position but I think that when we're talking about an issue that is as explosively divisive as this among people we need to recognize that the scriptures have the final authority for us and when we speak we ought to speak with calm and reason.

My message this evening is going to be divided into several parts. I'll tip you off to what's coming.

First thing I'd like to do is talk to you about the matter of alcohol in America today and the effects that alcoholic consumption are having on the country.

I'd like to go from that sort of survey background of what the contemporary status of alcohol in the United States is to talk about biblical data as it relates to alcoholic beverages. We'll look at Old and New Testament data on the subject of wine, which is the alcoholic drink in the scripture.

Then when we're through of that rather extensive section I'd like to return to some suggested principles for Christian living today.

Then I'd like to close with a word to those in the audience who are really having a problem with alcohol and facing the possibility of alcoholism in your own life or in your family.

Several weeks ago I read in the newspapers that a study had just been published by the Department of Health and Human Services on alcohol and health. The first chapter in this tremendous report is a summary of all the other chapters. Since the data is so fresh I'd like to take some time quoting from this survey.

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The report indicates that alcohol is undoubtedly the most widely used and abused drug in America. In 1981 the latest year for which figures are available, the equivalent of 2.77 gallons of absolute pure alcohol was sold per person over age 14 in the United States. Translated into alcoholic this means that 591 twelve-ounce cans of beer was sold to every American age 14 and over on an annual basis.

Or if you don't want to figure it in terms of beer, 115 bottles or fifths of table wine were sold per American 14 years of age and over. Or if you want to use another calculator, 35 fifths of 80 proof whisky, gin, or tonic was sold to every American age 14 or over.

However Americans are far from equal in their drinking habits. A national survey reported that a third of the adults don't drink. Another third reported drinking just over 2 drinks a week or .21 ounces of absolute alcohol per day. By the way. The legal limit of drunken driving is .1 percent. That's double the legal limit if you drink it all at one time.

The remaining third of Americans report consuming an average of 14 drinks per week. Such averages though are deceiving. A tenth of the drinking population consume half of the alcoholic beverages sold. By ninth grade more than half – 56% of high school seniors – responding to an annual 1982 national survey had tried alcohol. But that's ninth grade that had tried alcohol. But by their senior year more than nine out of ten, 93% of America high school seniors had tried alcohol. Almost all seniors 90% had drunk alcoholic beverages in the previous year. That was in their junior or senior year of high school. Two out of five, or 41% seniors, reported that they had had 5 or more drinks enough to become drunk on single occasion in the two weeks prior to the survey.

The report goes on to talk about alcohol under certain characteristics. Alcohol and the brain. Documents the effects of alcohol on skilled performance. One is not adept at eye hand coordination and movement obviously with any degree of alcohol in their body. Or any significant degree.

There is a linkage between alcohol and brain damage. In fact chronic brain injury caused by alcohol is second only to Alzheimer's disease as a known cause of mental deterioration in adults. The report notes other health hazards caused by alcohol. The digestive track. Cancers of the mouth, tongue, pharynx and esophagus are more common in alcoholics than in non alcoholics.

Alcohol and the heart. Alcohol when used heavily may have detrimental effects on the heart. Effect on other muscles. Alcohol and the blood. Excessive drinking causes blood abnormalities. Alcohol and sexuality. Alcohol interferes with male sexual functioning and female sexual functioning.

Alcohol and pregnancy. Clinical and experimental research over the past decade underscores the threat to the developing fetus and material a misuse represents the term fetal alcohol syndrome first used ten years ago to describe a set of symptoms in the newborn infant believed to be caused by heavy maternal alcohol abuse. It has recently been more carefully standardized. It produces first, growth retardation before and after birth. Second, abnormal features of the face and head. Such as unusually small head circumference and or flattening of facial features. Third, evidence

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of central nervous system abnormalities. The word to pregnant women today is do not drink. You're risking the injury of your baby if you drink.

One third of the problems that children experience mentally while in the womb are all related. It's the second most crippling thing that a fetus experiences.

The report goes on to document diverse social consequences of alcohol. For example traffic accidents. Traffic accidents are the fifth leading cause of death in the United States. And the leading cause of death of those under age 35. In the latest year for which data exists 1981, such tragedies killed 49,000 people and permanently disabled 150,000 persons. The consensus is clear. Alcohol is responsible for up to one half of these tragedies. One half. 25-28,000 deaths a year on America roads and highways are related to drinking and driving.

The national survey was done that indicated that one out of every 50 persons on the road is legally drunk at any time of any 24-hour period in the day. One out of 50 national average.

Same study was done by government agency in Los Angeles County. One out of every 20 drivers is legally drunk at any hour of the day.

Between 10 in the evening and 4 in the morning one out of six drivers are legally drunk. In fact the persons arrested for drunk driving in southern California, Orange County especially, their blood alcohol level is nearly two times, 80% higher than the legal rate for being drunk. It's at .18% rather than .10% alcohol is known as the legal cause of traffic accidents and deaths. A leading cause of industrial accidents and all other accidents.

The report from the government just released simply says that heavy drinkers had 2.7 times the accidental deaths rate committing traffic accidents of other Kaiser-Permanente follow-up during a ten-year period. They studied specifically Kaiser-Permanente accidental victims and discovered that heavy drinkers have 2.7 times the accidental death rate.

Alcohol is related to crime. One of the earlier homicide studies of 1958 found that either the murderer or the victim had been drinking in 2/3 of the slayings reviewed. Subsequent research has also found that a majority of murderer, their victims or both had been drinking prior to the crime. Fifty percent of the felonies related to murder, rape, and felony theft are related to drinking.

The role of alcohol in rape is even more interesting in the effects it's having. Studies of rapists indicate that they often drink heavily prior to the crime and their rate of alcoholism is 2 to 3 times that of the general population.

Alcohol and the family. Alcohol abuse undoubtedly affects family life. It is noteworthy that a third of the persons interviewed in the 1982 survey felt that alcohol caused problems in their family. One third Americans. But the precise ways in which it does so are more difficult to document. The rate of separation and divorce among alcoholics is seven times that of the general population. Two out of five domestic relations court cases involve alcohol. Divorce, legal separation, child custody disputes, altercations and the like. Two out of five. Forty percent.

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Most studies report that alcoholism or excessive drinking is involved in about half of the cases of spousal abuse. Child abuse may have alcoholic involvement to a heavier extent. But the data is inconclusive.

A 1983 study of the effects of parental alcoholism on children indicates that they're more likely to have school problems and to display anti-social behavior. Other studies report that such children have less esteem. More anxiety systems, more aggression and psychosomatic systems. They claim illness more often than other children.

Alcohol is also directly related to suicide. Four out of 5 persons who attempt suicide have been drinking at the time. Alcoholics commit suicide from six to fifteen times more frequently than the general population.

Economic costs. Recent calculation places the annual national loss due to alcoholism and alcoholic drinking at 49.4 billion dollars. The bulk of this amount 36.8 billion represents the value of lost productivity. Persons not working because of drinking. The cost of various kinds of medical care for alcohol related illness and injury total 6.4 billion a year. The remaining 6.2 billion includes such added costs as traffic accidents, fires, crime and other miscellaneous losses attributable to alcohol.

Sobering statistics of the tremendous costs that alcohol imposes upon our society.

When we open the scripture to look at biblical data on alcoholic beverages we want to see how the scriptures help us understand and interpret what our response to the problem of alcohol in our culture is.

We want to start with the Old Testament. The Old Testament itself has over 150 references to wine. There are 6 different main words that are employed. But two words especially stand out. The word *tirosh*, which is used some 29 times in the Old Testament and most often refers to non alcoholic grape juice. Fresh juice directly from the vine. There are a few occasions where the word *tirosh* can be used synonymously with the other word for wine, which has alcoholic content. Most commonly it refers to a non alcoholic drink.

The major word in the Old Testament that is used for wine is the word *yayin*. It is most commonly throughout the translations translated "wine." It's the direct equivalent of the English word wine. Although when we later talk about contemporary wine and biblical wine we're going to make some distinctions.

Different people count it different ways. Some have counted it as high as 141 usages of the word *yayin* in the Old Testament. Others count it 135.

The use of the word *yayin* is used 29 times in a basically negative context where it is frowned upon. And 67 times either in a neutral or positive context. Examples of the negative way in which *yayin* is used.

The drunkenness of Noah, Genesis 9:21. After the deliverance of the ark he is drunk and he is uncovered before his sons.

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The drunkenness of Lot, Genesis 9:32-34. Lot drank. Lot drank *yayin*. Those who say that all biblical references to the word wine refer to grape juice neglect the fact that Lot drank. Those who say that all biblical references to the word wine refer to grape juice neglect the fact that Lot drank *yayin* and became drunk and had incestuous relations with both his daughters as the result.

We also see that Nabal who was married to Abigail who later married David, was a man who became drunk on *yayin*. 1 Samuel 25:37.

And Amnon who was David's son was killed at a time by Absalom when Amnon was drunk with *yayin*. 2 Samuel 13:28.

The other negative usage occurs in areas like Psalm 60:3. That occur in areas like Psalm 60:3. That *yayin* or wine makes us stagger. It's even referred in a sense in Psalm 75:8 as given by the Lord as punishment to the wicked.

So 29 of the 133 usages are negative in connotation.

Then there are a lot of references that are simply neutral. Simply record wine as a staple of diet. Including it in a list of provisions such as John 9:4 or Nehemiah 2:1 simply notes that they have bread and wine. Makes no judgment negative or positive.

There are over 30 references to *yayim* in the Old Testament that are positive in context. It is used by people who are godly in their life. Persons like Melchizedek and Abraham. Melchizedek brings out wine and bread and serves it to Abraham, Genesis 14:18.

David himself has *yayim* in 2 Samuel 16:1-2. And Nehemiah's men also in Nehemiah 5:18.

Of course the Song of Solomon celebrates in *yayim* and compares it to love and the bride brags on the bridegroom's kisses by saying they are even better than wine.

These are the usages where *yayim* is used in a rhetorical sense, not an instructive sense of didactic or teaching sense but simply reporting its use. It's used both negatively, positively and neutrally.

There are passages where *yayim* or wine are used in an instructive way. When it is used in instruction it generally falls into two categories. One of total prohibition. There were certain groups within Jewish life that chose not to drink wine including the Nazarites and the Rechabites (Jeremiah 35:1-14) and princes (Proverbs 31:4) are told not to drink wine. That is the lot of senseless people. There are those contexts where it is forbidden.

Then also when wine is used in a teaching sense there are warnings on its use in terms of drunkenness. Proverbs is especially famous for a number of these: Proverbs 20:1, 21:17, 33:29-34, 31:4-7.

So in a teaching kind of a way when *yayim* is used it is used either as a prohibition, it is used as a warning for the wrongful things that happen when alcoholic beverages are drunk. And also used in teaching as a common to include wine in offerings given to God. It might be noted when

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offerings, libations, are given at the altar of sacrifice to God they are poured out upon the altar and not drunk.

That's the data in the Old Testament. I'll try to interpret it in just a moment. I want you to recognize that what we're dealing with in *yayim* is not grape juice.

When it comes to wine in the New Testament, the common Greek word used is *oinos*, which is used 33 times in the New Testament. Jesus uses it as an illustration, not to put new wine in old wineskins. His teaching versus that of the Pharisees and scribes.

John the Baptist is one who abstains from wine and strong drink, Luke 1:15.

Jesus however is accused of being a wine bibber, or drinker, Matthew 11:19. He associated with sinners and tax collectors and was misread.

However when we see Jesus on the cross we find him refusing strong drink. He did not drink to drown his pain on the cross. Mark 15:23.

John 2, he turned water into wine, his first miracle.

At the Lord's Supper a cup was drunk, since it was the Passover that cup would have been wine.

Romans 14:21, Paul gives admonitions to Christians who are having divisions over eating certain meats and drinking wine. He says it's better not to eat or drink wine or do anything else to cause your brother to fall.

Church leaders are selected on the basis that they are not given to much wine, they must be sober. 1 Timothy 3:8 and Titus 2:3.

Timothy is urged in 1 Timothy 5:23 to use a little wine for his stomach's sake and his oft infirmity.

Paul in Ephesians 5:18 tells the believers not to be drunk with wine wherein is excess but to be filled with the Spirit.

It would appear from a cursory reading of the Old and New Testament therefore that we are dealing in the scripture with the word "wine" as a beverage that contains alcoholic content. How do we interpret this data? Obviously there are believers who look at the use of wine in the Old and the New Testament and say, no matter what it has to refer to a non-alcoholic beverage. It has to refer to grape juice because God would not have created anything that would have had alcoholic content in it. They are there would not be alcoholic content in the drink, therefore the scriptures do not hold to that position.

I think however with some research that has been done in more recent years on the nature of alcoholic content in biblical wine, we're left with safer ground in interpreting the scripture fairly. As evangelicals, Bible believing Christians, we do believe that the Bible alone must be our infallible rule for faith and practice and our final authority in matters even such as this.

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When we look therefore at the issue of wine in the Bible we maybe have to say as a kind of conclusion that it is neither grape juice nor is it like alcoholic wines and drinks of today. An article in *Christianity Today* by Robert Stein, Wine drinking in New Testament times, in 1975. I've yet to read anything better than Dr. Stein's understanding of the subject.

He notes in ancient times wine was usually stored in large pointed jugs called *amphorae*. When wine was going to be used it was poured out of the *amphorae* into large bowls called *kraters*. At that point the wine was mixed with water. When the wine was actually going to be consumed it was poured out of the *kraters* into cups or *kylix*. It's important to note that before the wine was drunk the most common way was for it to be mixed with water. The *kylix* were filled not from the *amphorae*, the storage jugs for the unadulterated wine but from the *kraters*. The ration of water to wine widely varied. Stein concludes that *oinos* used in the biblical worlds was different from the wine on the market today. That wine was more mixed with water than contemporary wine.

In the New Testament the amount of alcohol in the wine is never discussed. Stein would say that the burden of proof is on anyone who would say the wine of the New Testament is substantially different from the wine mentioned by the Greeks and Jews of the inter-testamental period and the early church fathers.

Obviously wine could have a stronger usage depending on the adulteration of the water with the wine. We do not know in all cases in the scripture what the mixture was.

I've tried to take all the data and come to what for me seems to be a reasonable and defensible position as an individual Christian in the matter of my personal involvement in alcoholic beverages. I've reached these conclusions.

First, that the alcoholic content today is most likely much higher than in the normal household wine of the Bible.

Second, no one really knows their own susceptibility to alcohol. You cannot predict what your own susceptibility will be. We do know that one out of ever fifteen persons who begins by taking an alcoholic drink will end up as an alcoholic. In some statistics they find one out of ten persons who first take an alcoholic drink wind up with alcoholism as a disease, a factor in their life. That's a high rate of risk and there's really no predictability for it. Although those individuals who come from drinking families suggest some heredity connection between children and alcoholic parents. But even the more conservative number of one out of fifteen, that's a very high rate of risk.

Third, my example is an example for others. I'm conscious of the fact that my own example might lead to someone else falling. While I may not have the potential of becoming an alcoholic it is no way to guarantee that my example may not be an encouragement to someone else.

Paul gives us a word of counsel in Romans 14:12 on the safe side where he indicates it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or anything by which your brother stumbles. Philippians 2:4 tells us do not merely look out for our own personal interests but also for the interests of others. Especially parents need to consider the presence of alcoholic drinks on their own home premises. What kind of example are your children seeing? What kind of stumbling block might you be

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setting up that will impact them in later life? Those are serious questions I think need to be considered and answered.

Fourth, in America culture as well as European there is really no valid reason to drink. In biblical times the beverages that were available were the fruit of the vine and water. Or some other kind of concoction that would be alcoholic in content. Strong drink specifically was forbidden by the scripture.

Today a multitude of other beverages are available which are non-addictive and do not produce inebriated states nor do they lead to the kinds of evil social consequences that alcohol leads to. We in our culture simply don't have a valid reason to drink alcoholic beverages other than it's simply the social thing to do. In light of the risks involved in question whether that's the wise thing to do.

I think fifth, I personally abstain from drinking any alcoholic beverage as a symbolic protest against the evil that alcohol has caused in our culture. It's my private way as a Christian of protesting what has happened in our society as a result of alcohol. My way of protesting the lives that have been snuffed out or permanently impaired because of the influence of alcohol in our culture. It's my way of protesting what alcohol has done to individuals and to families and the massive amounts of abuse in our society. It's my way also I think of being a good steward of my Christian financial resources in choosing to spend my money on businesses and in the Lord's work that are doing some good in the world.

In light of the tremendous economic and social damages to human life, the deprivation of human life that is occurring because of alcohol, I choose not to drink alcoholic beverages as a symbolic protest.

I want to close with special word to those who may be on the verge of being trapped by alcohol. Or maybe you're in a family situation where the consumption of alcohol is becoming a real problem.

I believe personally that alcoholism starts out as a spiritual problem and ends up as a chemical problem. When the person wants to break spiritually free they're chemically dependent. Sometimes we feel that therefore to use any means other than a non spiritual means to help an alcoholic person somehow to break their alcoholism is somehow not right. That we somehow should just pray them through and not send them to a treatment program or Alcoholics Anonymous.

But such is not always the case. I know that God has delivered people directly as a result of prayer and deliverance from alcoholism. At the same time I know others – Christians – who have been trapped in alcoholism, who have been prayed for and have not been cured. The problem that begins to develop is one of defeat and discouragement, as if I go to a treatment program maybe I'm not doing the Christian thing. God is always on the side of God. Just like he can treat pain by the means of an aspirin or through direct healing. He can treat a problem that started out as a spiritual wrong that has become a chemical dependency. He can begin to work in freeing you from the chemical dependency and bring you to a place of spiritual freedom simultaneously.

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How do you know if you're on the verge of becoming an alcoholic?

Do you lose time from work due to drinking?

Is drinking making your home life unhappy?

Do you drink because you are shy with other people?

Is drinking effecting your reputation?

Have you ever felt remorse after drinking?

Do you turn to lower companions in an inferior environment when drinking? In other words when you're drinking you hang out with types you wouldn't hang out with when you're sober.

Does your drinking make you careless of your family's welfare?

Has your ambition decreased since drinking?

Are you in financial difficulties as a result of drinking?

Do you crave a drink at a definite time daily?

Do you need a drink "the morning after"?

Does drinking cause you to have difficulty sleeping?

Has your work efficiency decreased since drinking?

Is drinking jeopardizing your job or business?

Do you drink to escape from worries or troubles?

Do you drink alone?

Have you ever had a complete loss of memory as a result of drinking?

Has a physician ever treated you for drinking?

Have you ever been a patient in a hospital or other institution because of drinking?

Do you drink to build up self-confidence?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions there is a definite warning that you may be an alcoholic.

To the person who is an alcoholic or has answered one or more of these questions yes, let me suggest some things for you.

First, there are some excellent books that are very helpful to you. I would strongly encourage you if you're having an alcoholic problem to seek counsel. Let us refer you to a program, either Christian or secular that will help you get delivered from the chemical dependency upon alcohol as well as working through the spiritual dynamics of becoming clean in your spirit. The main thing is to get started and to get going. I personally would high recommend Alcoholics Anonymous. Many persons have been freed of alcoholism as a result. We must realize that once an alcoholic always an alcoholic. Your rate of alcoholic tendency does not go down if you've been off of drink for a year or two. If you take a drink you're right back at the level you were when you left off.

For those of you who do not have a problem with alcoholism in your life I think a reasonable and good position to hold in light of what has happened both in scriptural definition of the word "wine" and in light of the tremendous cost that alcohol is having in our culture today that it is very sane position and a right position to not drink any alcoholic beverage.

And of course the scripture talks to us too about the kind of joy no chemical can bring to our life. "Be not drunk with wine but be filled with the Spirit," that the presence of Jesus Christ in our life

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can really bring us the emotional wholeness and even the high we may be looking for when we're in a period of despair and despondency. That Christ can do far more for us.

I trust that these words are helpful to you, that they are counsel that is received, and they'll be a blessing in your life.