

ALCOHOL, TOBACCO and the Christian

Some members of the church seem determined to defend the indefensible and still be considered faithful followers of the sinless Savior. Two of the most frequently defended practices are consumption of beverage alcohol and tobacco use. This article will discuss these more issues in that order.

Beverage Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol consumption is the number one drug problem in America. The Scriptures have somewhat to say on this practice. Solomon decreed: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise" (Prov. 20;1). The apostle Paul commanded:

See then that ye walk circumspectly {carefully, ASV}, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess. (Eph. 5:17-18)

Solomon and Paul proclaimed that one who imbibes alcohol as a beverage is unwise, deceived, foolish, and without understanding. It is one thing to contend with worldly-minded people relative to alcohol consumption, but it is truly sad when we must contend with members of the Lord's church about it. On several occasions I have heard brethren affirm that drinking "in moderation" is acceptable and that "drunkenness" is all that the Bible condemns. They argue that only the person who is staggering is considered drunk. Indeed the Bible condemns drunkenness, but drunkenness begins with that first drink. Thus, to condemn drunkenness is to condemn "social" or "moderate drinking". I will now set forth some proof of this assertion.

A Brief Word Study

The word *wine* is found 212 times in the KJ Version of the Bible. In the New Testament, *wine* is translated from *oinos*, a word somewhat like our English word *cider*, which can refer to unfermented or to fermented apple juice. *Oinos* can refer to the juice while still in the grape, to a cluster of grapes, to grape juice, or to an intoxicating drink (*fermented* juice). In Holy Writ, therefore, drinking "wine" is sometimes depicted as permissible, but other times forbidden. If one is not aware of the various meanings of *wine*, depending on the context, he might reach the conclusion that the Bible only condemns extreme drunkenness, rather than drinking "moderately."

English dictionaries make no mention of the various Biblical meanings of *wine*. Obviously, Bible students must take care in selecting the sources they use to defend and understand Scriptural words. We must always allow the immediate context to help determine the meaning of Biblical words.

Another word bearing on our subject is *drunkenness*, which is translated from the Greek word *methe*. Thayer's Greek Lexicon (p. 395) defines this word as "intoxication; drunkenness." The verb form of *methe* is *methusko*, which means "to make drunk, or grow drunk, to become intoxicated" (p. 396), thus the process that produces drunkenness. *Methe* is found three times in the New Testament, all of which condemn drunkenness (Luke 21:34; Rom. 13; Gal. 5:21). The assertion that *drunkenness* refers only to the staggering, slurred-speech state, however, cannot be proved.

To say, "Don't get drunk," is somewhat parallel to saying today, "Don't get high on drugs." Surely, no one would understand this warning to be a permission to smoke marijuana "moderately." If the Scriptural prohibition of drunkenness (identified as a "work of the flesh" that will cause one to be lost (Gal. 5:19-21) permits "moderate" drinking, does

it permit the other works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 (e.g., adultery or fornication) in moderation?

Methusko is found in Ephesians 5:18, mentioned above, relating to the process that results in drunkenness. The first drink of alcohol begins the process of drunkenness. The difference between a “social drinker” and a “drunkard” is a matter of **degree**, rather than **kind**. Paul condemns the very process of becoming intoxicated, and thereby he condemns social drinking. The only way to respect the Bible’s condemnation of drunkenness is to abstain from drinking (1 The. 5:22).

The Water-to-Wine Miracle

“Faith only” advocates erroneously appeal to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:40-43); advocates of alcoholic beverage consumption erroneously appeal to Jesus’ miracle of turning water to wine (John 2:1-10). Context alone must govern the meaning of *wine* in this passage. Those who try to defend drinking alcohol assert that the term *well drunk* (*drunk freely*, ASV [v. 10] indicates that they had been drinking alcoholic wine.

If the wine Jesus miraculously made was alcoholic in content, the pots it filled would equal approximately 150 gallons of beverage. Divided into one-half servings, this would supply about 2,400 servings. Are we to believe that the wedding guests had already drunk all of the alleged initial alcoholic beverage, and that Jesus made 150 additional gallons, and yet (as some argue) He was not encouraging drunkenness?

If Jesus provided 2,400 servings of alcoholic wine for the wedding guests who had already been drinking such wine, He most certainly violated Scripture by encouraging drunkenness. Habakkuk warned: “Woe unto him that that giveth his neighbor drink, that putteth thy bottle to [him], and maketh [him] drunken also...” (2:15). This passage clearly pronounces a curse upon anyone who provides alcoholic beverages to others or encourages recreational drinking of same. This behavior by the Lord would therefore be at least one instance in which we should not “follow his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

The phrase *well drunk* in John 2:10 simply refers to being full or filled, not to a state of inebriation. It is merely a reference to the **quantity** of the beverage consumed, as we use *well fed* in reference to the amount of food one has eaten. Some assert that John’s reference to “good wine” and “worse wine” implies alcoholic content. However, these terms simply refer to the custom of setting the best before one’s guess first, when the appetite is greatest, and then bringing forth an inferior beverage after stomachs are no longer empty. The quality of grape juice, whether better or worse, always depends upon a host of factors, such as ripeness, the weather at harvest time, geographical area in which the grapes were grown, the soil, and many others. Thus, “good” and “worse” wine is not to be understood as having any alcoholic implication whatsoever. Those who argue that Jesus made and encouraged the drinking of fermented wine at Cana border on blasphemy.

[It should be noted that the “wine” described in John 2 is described by the adjective “good”, which is from the Greek word *kalos*, which “denotes that which is intrinsically ‘good’”, such as fruit, tree, ground, fish, Law and doctrine, VINE, p. 274. This would NOT be the word to describe some thing that had become polluted, rotten, or fermented, no matter how some might describe the change from its pure state. DON TARBET)

Other “Moderation” Arguments Examined

Concerning deacons, Paul instructed: “Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre” (1 Tim. 3:8). He also wrote concerning older women: “The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as

becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things" (Tit. 2:3). Do these passages suggest that Christians may imbibe "some" as long as it is not "too much"? To argue that the phrase "not given to much wine" allows for some drinking of an alcoholic beverage is to altogether misunderstand this passage. Consider another misunderstood passage with similar wording: "Be not over much wicked" (Eccl. 7:17). Does Solomon suggest that we can be "moderately" wicked, as long as we do not "overdo" it?

Another passage defenders of "moderate" drinking employ is Paul's charge to Timothy: "Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities" (1 Tim. 5:23). They argue that, since Paul instructed Timothy to drink some wine, we may do so today. However, they conveniently ignore the very specific reason Paul told Timothy to do so: "for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities." Timothy was authorized to drink wine for a medicinal purpose, rather than for pleasure. To conclude from this passage that alcohol can be consumed as a social beverage is a tremendous leap from what Paul authorized Timothy to do. Morphine is used as a medicine, but no right-thinking person argues for its recreational or social consumption. Besides all of the above, no one can prove that the "wine" Timothy was to drink was anything more than mere grape juice.

If one argues that it is permissible to give others a drink as long as they do not get "knocked-down" drunk, how would we know at what point one gets to that state? Different people arrive at different levels of drunkenness at different times, depending upon such things as food consumption, body mass, metabolism, and even perspiration rates.

To say that one can drink "as long as he does not get drunk" before he knows how far he can go without getting drunk! Thus, one is forced to sin to know how far he can go without sinning. This brings up the question: "Does God overlook the first sin of drinking till 'drunk' since it is the beginning of a 'search for truth?'"

Drunkenness is not just the final state of the drinker; it is the very process by which one becomes drunk, which begins with the first drink. Alcohol as a beverage will deprive, and deceive in this world and in the world to come, will damn those who imbibe it (Prov. 23:31-32; 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10; Gal. 5:21).

Tobacco Use

Do smoking and uses of other tobacco produces (i. e., dipping snuff, chewing tobacco) truly allow one's "light to shine before men"? (Mat. 5:16) The answer should be obvious. Likely even most worldlyings understand that such practices (especially smoking) are not compatible with Christian behavior. How much more should those understand who profess to follow Christ.

Sadly, the words of Jesus Himself are sometimes misapplied in an effort to defend tobacco use:

And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth into the draught, purging all meats? And he said, That which come out of the man, that defileth the man (Mark 7:18-20).

Those who misuse this passage argue that, since Jesus said that things we take into our bodies do not defile us, therefore taking tobacco into our bodies is permitted. The defender of drinking alcohol could make the same assertion—as could marijuana smokers and users of cocaine and every other illegal and destructive narcotic—with just as little

justification. As the context shows, the Lord had no such things as poisonous and destructive substances in mind in his statement about things that enter and defile the body. The discussion in this context centered on eating without washing one's hands, as the disciples were doing (vv. 1-5). Jesus simply replied to the accusing Pharisees and scribes that one who failed to wash his hands before eating was thereby defiled, for impurities that might be on one's hands would be eliminated by passing through the digestive system. Rather, real defilement is demonstrated by a person's behavior, because such indicates whether or not one's heart is pure (v. 21).

Paul warned about taking proper care of our bodies. Our bodies do not belong to us, but they are temples of the Holy Spirit, they have been bought with the price of Jesus' blood, and we are therefore to use them to God's glory (1 Cor. 6;19-20). In light of this warning, how can anyone justify the use of tobacco, which possesses numerous toxic agents that attack and destroy the body? The use of tobacco is a slower, but hardly less sure, means of suicide than blowing one's brains out with a gun.

Consider some additional passages that have implications for tobacco users:

Use of tobacco identifies us with the world instead of with God and His Son: I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

We should abstain from even permissible practices, if they cause another to sin:

Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me: But whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea (Mat. 18:4-6).

And thus, sinning against the brethren, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, ye sin against Christ. Wherefore, if meat causeth my brother to stumble, I will eat no flesh for evermore, that I cause not my brother to stumble (1 Cor. 8:12-13).

Tobacco is powerfully addictive; we should not allow ourselves to be enslaved by anything or anyone, except Christ:

All things are lawful for me; but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful for me; but I will not be brought under the power of any (1 Cor. 6:12).

Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

One who uses tobacco does not follow a good example and does not set a good example for others.

Be ye imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). (Can you imagine Jesus or the apostle Paul using tobacco in any form? What father or mother would actually **want** sons or daughters to use tobacco? Young people don't always do what they are told or admonished to do, but they nearly always follow parents' examples.

The things which ye both learned and received and heard and saw in me, these things do and the God of peace shall be with you (Phil. 4:9).

Let no man despise thy youth, but be thou an ensample to them that believe, in word, in manner of life, in love, in faith, in purity (1 Tim. 4:12).

A cigarette commercial of bygone years, intended to entice more women to smoke, used the slogan: "You've come a long way, baby." Someone correctly retorted, "Yes, you've come a long way, but in the wrong direction." Sadly, this is true of some in the church. In spite of the numerous physical and spiritual hazards involved, some members of the church persist in trying to defend the use of tobacco.

Conclusion

May we all be willing to sacrifice whatever habits and practices necessary to bring our lives into conformity with the perfect example of Jesus and the perfect example of Jesus and the perfect patter of behavior revealed in His word.

RYAN KEPKE (with notes added by Don Tarbet)