

Just Grape Juice?: The Sober Truth About Biblical Wine

ISSUE: Some Christians claim that the wine spoken of in Scripture was really grape juice, because the fermentation processes in ancient times were not very good. Is this true? Does Scripture really forbid the drinking of alcohol?

RESPONSE: Scripture forbids drunkenness, i.e., the drinking of alcohol to excess (e.g., Eph. 5:18).¹ However, it is clearly impossible to get drunk unless one drinks alcohol. Thus, the numerous descriptions of drunkenness in Scripture would be inaccurate, and the scriptural prohibition on drunkenness would be senseless, unless alcohol was available. Because wine is specifically mentioned as the substance upon which people get drunk, one can reasonably conclude that the wine of Scripture, when abused, contained sufficient quantities of alcohol to do cause drunkenness.

In fact, as will be discussed, John uses the same word for wine regarding Jesus' miracle at the wedding at Cana (Jn. 2:1-11) as the author of Genesis does to describe the substance on which does Noah became drunk (Gen. 9:24). Indeed, Scripture endorses the prudent use of wine and, by implication, other alcoholic beverages (Jn. 2:1-11 and 1 Tim. 5:23).

DISCUSSION: Because many Christians are uncomfortable with the consumption of alcohol, they claim that Scripture forbids all consumption of alcoholic beverages. When it is pointed out that Christ turned water into wine, they assert that the "wine" of ancient times was of such an inferior quality, due to the lack of good fermentation processes, that it was essentially grape juice which contained little or no alcohol.² Scripture makes it quite clear that the people of Scripture used *alcoholic* wine, sometimes sinfully:

Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk (Gen. 9:20-21);

Come, let us make our father [Lot] drink wine, and we will lie with him. . . (Gen. 19:32-36).

A variation on the argument states that the people of the Old Testament drank alcoholic wine, but neither Christ nor the apostles did so; rather, Christ turned water into grape juice at the wedding at Cana (Jn. 2:1-11), not alcoholic wine. The problem with this argument, though, is the absence of scriptural evidence. The **same** word is used for "wine" in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Greek version of the Old Testament (translated in 250 B.C.) uses the same word for wine (*oinou*) in Gen. 9:24 that John uses in chapter 2:1-11. Surely if there were both alcoholic and non-alcoholic fruits of the grape, Scripture would make that clear to us by using two different words. After all, according to Protestant tradition, the teachings necessary to avoid sin are clear and obvious to anyone who simply reads Scripture. Why would Scripture confuse us by failing to distinguish alcoholic wine from grape juice, if drinking alcohol were sinful?³

"The word employed is the normal word for wine," agrees Howard Charles, a Protestant professor of New Testament studies. "Both classical Greek and the papyri [ancient manuscripts in general] employed another word for unfermented grape juice [i.e., *trux*]. Even though we may wish it otherwise, honest exegesis compels the candid admission that on this occasion Jesus deliberately added to the stock of wine available for consumption at the wedding feast."⁴

It is true that Paul wrote: "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make others fall by what he eats; It is not right to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble" (Rom. 14:20-21).

But this **does not** mean that we are not allowed to drink wine at all. It means that we are not to value our own pleasures over the salvation of another. If someone has a problem with wine, we should avoid consuming it around them. Perhaps, for example, the person is an alcoholic and would be tempted to drink with you if you drank. In such situations, we should avoid being a stumbling block. Nevertheless, Scripture describes Christ as changing water into

wine, and not specifying that this wine was non-alcoholic.

St. Paul writes elsewhere: “Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongues, not addicted to much wine. . .” (1 Tim. 3:8).

Here, the *authentic* teaching of Scripture on drinking is apparent. “Drinking much wine,” i.e., drinking wine to excess, is the problem which must be avoided. Paul does not say that deacons should not drink at all. He says bishops should not be drunkards (1 Tim. 3:3), but he does not say that they may not drink at all.

Christians agree that drinking wine to excess is a sin. Indeed, the Catholic Church teaches that drunkenness is sinful, a transgression magnified when one endangers his own or others’ safety (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2290). But Scripture and Tradition agree that moderate drinking is morally acceptable: “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” (1 Tim. 5:23).

¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2290.

² There was *nothing* inadequate or qualitatively different about the fermentation process, which is *entirely natural*, in Old or New Testament times when compared to modernity. Wine and beer are made now *exactly* the same way they were thousands of years ago; only things like the storage containers and incidental ingredients have changed. The alcohol content of ancient wine and beer falls in the same range of alcohol content as modern wine and beer. It is true that these ancient cultures did not distill liquor, but wine and beer are not distilled beverages.

³ This argument, which says that New Testament wine is really grape juice, is also weakened by what the steward says in Jn. 2:10. Clearly wine in this time period contained sufficient amounts of alcohol that when people had a lot of it they could not tell good wine from bad wine.

⁴ Howard H. Charles, *Alcohol and the Bible*. Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1981, p. 16. Dr. Charles’ education includes studying at Princeton Theological Seminary and the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He has served as professor of New Testament studies at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Ind.

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Last edited: 12/97

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