
Turning Water to Wine

A Christian Discussion about Alcohol

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Thinking about Thinking

When you go to the internet searching for an answer there's generally two approaches: you can read the top result (usually generated by AI) or you can spend a lot of time on numerous sites trying to get a more clear answer. If you're really concerned with understanding you can even do the hard work of making sure the websites are credible. The first route produces something like a clear answer (and fast!) while the second produces less clarity, more questions, and it's slower.

Which one do you normally opt for? Me too, most of the time. The problem is that many Christians do the same thing with some fairly important matters of life and faith. A funny phenomenon occurs in that the one who spends less time thinking has more confidence in an inferior "answer", and the one who spends more time thinking has less confidence and is less certain even though they have a clearer and more accurate picture of the subject. American Christian culture has certainly tended to mirror general American culture in its tendency to accept that an opinion confidently asserted is as good as fact; politics and pulpit both share that same flaw.

We like quick answers for the same reason we like fast food. It's quick, easy, and relatively inexpensive. Oh, and it costs me nothing in the way of hard work or energy preparing it. The problem is that, like fast food, a quick answer is usually not the best available. Many questions are complex and require a consideration of many variables and perspectives. They create a natural tension as we consider questions like "which sources should I give greater consideration to?" and "does this answer fit objective, provable reality?" Most importantly, it's striking that so few Christians are concerned with the question "what did Jesus do and teach?" Sadly, many Christians simply have not considered the life and teachings of Christ to be especially applicable to their daily lives and that's dangerous for people professing to be disciples (i.e. students) of Jesus.

With that said, I'd like to "go to school" on the question of alcohol and the believer. This is a fraught topic for many Christians and rightfully so; it's not easy. However, it seems to me that relatively few Christians have done the hard work of developing a Biblical perspective of alcohol. Luckily, Jesus has given us words on the matter and so have the writers of Scripture. I don't intend to give this subject a full treatment, only to give you some biblical anchors to help guide your discussion and thought and leave you with some good questions. If I do my job well, you'll leave with more questions

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and more to consider than just a few easy answers. I can think of three especially relevant biblical principles that will help us greatly if we wish to have a healthy relationship with alcohol. My goal is to get us to speak to one another about this and ask how we might look more like Jesus. We will have failed considerably if this is only a catalyst for conversation, ideology, theology, or the like. Each one of us has changes to make in the way we live our lives. Not one of us is just like Christ so let's ask him, each one of us, "how can I become more like you?" And then let's not fool ourselves into thinking we're done with our effort, for he asks each one of us to obey him if we love him (John 14:23), and obedience takes action (James 2:18).

Principle 1: Love is the overriding principle.

The most important guiding principle for how we should relate to alcohol is simply love. Love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8). If we love like Christ does we have nothing more to worry about, law or otherwise. Our use of alcohol should be guided by the question, "am I being loving to others and myself?" And our definition of love should be wrapped up completely in the person and teachings of Jesus. There are so many different situations we might find ourselves in regarding alcohol, but this question should be our compass rose for acting like Jesus.

The Corinthian church found itself in a difficult predicament in the first century: Greek pagan religion regularly sacrificed food to idols and all that went along with that was unsightly to say the least. When some of the Corinthians converted to Christianity they ran up against the issue of whether it was ok to continue to eat food sacrificed to idols since much of the meat sold in the market had come from pagan temples. Paul realized that idols were nothing so one could eat food sacrificed to them knowing that God was the only God and that food eaten with thankfulness to Him would be no sin at all. There were many in the church that didn't have a strong grasp of that concept, and their consciences wouldn't allow them to eat food sacrificed to idols. They, likewise, took offense at those in the church who ate the sacrificed food. Paul is clear in his explanation of what was permitted, so case settled, right? Everyone that was wrong needed to get on the right train and get over it. Right ideas win, right? Well, not to Paul. Paul equates it with the strong and the weak. In the world, the strong win and the weak deal with it. In Jesus' kingdom, Paul says, the strong use their freedom to serve and build up the weak, going lower not higher. He says "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that "We all possess knowledge." But knowledge puffs up while love builds up." (1 Co. 8:1). The operative principle of love is "building others up according to their needs" (Eph 4:29).

Let me be clear in the connection to alcohol: you may be right about your freedom to drink, but your rightness will not always produce righteousness, only love can do that. What you know will never be as important as how you love

“ Your rightness will not always produce righteousness. ”

Or, put another way, how you love will show whether you truly know as you ought (1 Co. 8:2). So when we are placed in any number of situations with alcohol we should be thinking of whether our use of it will build others up or tear them down. If we're around those who would take offense at our drinking, perhaps we should refrain because that is loving to them. If we're around people who have had issues with alcohol in their past, perhaps we should refrain because that is loving to them. If we're around those who drink and we know it would mean something to them for us to join them, perhaps we should consider drinking because that is loving to them (keeping in mind that you

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don't have to drink to be loving). If we have to exclude people so that we can drink, we are being unloving. If we try to convince others to drink against their will, we are being unloving. If we demand our own rights, we are being unloving. So, let selfless, humble, Godly love drive your decisions with alcohol.

Principle 2: Temperance is essential.

I love this word. It's not one we think about much but it's a concept flowing through all of scripture, and it's tied closely to the nature of God. You'll only find it in the King James translation because it's just not a commonly used word in modern English. It's translated as "self-control" in most modern translations. The Greek word is *egkrateia* and according to Strong's Greek Lexicon it means "the virtue of self-control or temperance, particularly in relation to one's desires and impulses. It is the ability to exercise restraint over one's own actions, emotions, and thoughts, aligning them with God's will and moral standards."

Jesus exhibits temperance perfectly in the Scripture: you can see it in his very incarnation, his refraining from calling down fire from heaven on his enemies, his gentleness towards the incompetence of his disciples, his submission in the Garden of Gethsemane, and it's captured perfectly in the hymn of Philippians 2 about his "being in very nature God" and yet not considering his equality with God "something to be used to his own advantage". Temperance is the beautiful characteristic found in those people who master themselves so as to be balanced, centered, and anchored within the will of God. Temperance avoids extremes and creates stability both within and without.

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Now the application to alcohol should be clear: the believer is meant to be temperate in their relationship with it. The Scripture speaks strongly against drunkenness (1 Peter 4:3, Gal 5:19-21, Eph 5:6, Rom 13:13); God simply says it's sinful and that those who want to follow Jesus won't engage with alcohol that way. It's important here that I mention I don't think God forbids drunkenness arbitrarily on

the grounds he doesn't want us to have fun. God is the truly good Father. He wants us to have life to the full (Jn 10:10). His purpose is to spare us and those around us the pain and damage done by overusing alcohol. It's not as if science has nothing to say on the matter either: evidence is clear that drunkenness is never good for you and is most certainly harmful to your body, mind, and relationships.

This principle isn't only relevant to getting drunk. It's meant to suggest balance is an important part of enjoying God's creation-gifts. I don't think we're meant to simply ask if we are getting drunk according state law. Rather, I think God desires for us to not drink too much alcohol, to be balanced and under control with how we approach it. Yes, that requires discernment and the help of the Spirit to convict and guide us accordingly (see Principle 3). It also requires the people of God to be involved in one another's lives, so as to help sharpen one another towards obedience in this matter (and many more). Now that we've covered one extreme, let's speak to the other end of temperance.

First, let me be clear: nobody has to drink and nobody should feel like they need to drink. If you're just not interested in drinking or if you have a rough family history and want no part of it, don't! You are free not to drink. Believers, however, are permitted to drink. Apparently Jesus and his disciples drank alcohol with at least some regularity.

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Jesus instituted the drinking of wine during his last supper (our Communion). His very first miracle was turning water to wine at the wedding feast in Cana. Jesus' critics used his drinking as a way to unfairly criticize him (Luke 7:33-35). So when we consider the question I posed above, the one all serious followers of Jesus keep front and center in their minds and actions, "what did Jesus do and teach?", we should not logically be able to surmise that Jesus forbade alcohol consumption. The Christian movements and denominations that prohibit alcohol consumption all find ways around the "problem" that Jesus did not teach or act in accord with their conclusions, and they've done him the good service of "fixing" him.

Paul, when faced with Greek asceticism which was a type of self-control on steroids, simply said that that level of self-constraint wasn't what God was after. Here's what he said to the Colossians:

"Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." - Colossians 2:20-23

We've been given freedom by the Spirit of God to use things like alcohol with a clear conscience for our enjoyment (similar to good food), but the same Spirit has also given us self-control and we should never use our freedom as a cover up for evil (1 Peter 2:16). Speaking of a cover up for evil, I want to note two things: one, underage drinking has no place among Christians. The Bible never condones lawbreaking for such a frivolous reason. Secondly, there is an increasing number of people who need to completely abandon alcohol due to their inability to have a healthy relationship with it. Because of that fact, temperance for them is cutting alcohol out of their lives. This isn't just true of alcohol. Temperance for some means to avoid casinos because they can't exercise temperance there. For others it means they need to avoid social media because they cannot control their consumption.

So, although I don't think God is after turning us all into monks who refuse all the pleasures the world has to offer, he may be calling you specifically to exercise temperance in a unique way due to your temptations. He certainly isn't interested in our becoming like everyone else who chases after comfort with disregard for his ways. He is after temperate people, those who exercise discipline and balance as they approach everything in life, not just alcohol. A temperate person will be thoughtful about their relationship with alcohol. They won't use it to medicate, because it's not medicine. They won't drink too much when and if they do drink. They also won't unfairly condemn those who do choose to drink. If they do drink they'll see it as a gift and not a right. They will have mastery over themselves and their consumption of alcohol. Each of us should have as a goal, therefore, to be temperate.

Principle 3: The Spirit gives discernment.

In Galatians 5:16-26, Paul says

"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who

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live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

This passage is absolutely essential to understanding how followers of Jesus are meant to live out the high calling of the Gospel. The Bible simply does not, nor could it ever, speak to every single situation we might find ourselves in. It says nothing about how we should interact with cell phones, how much money we should save for retirement, or whether we should send our children to public or private schools. Within the current conversation the Bible similarly doesn't speak to every situation you might find yourself in with alcohol. That's where the Spirit's guidance comes into play. Christ followers are meant to “walk by the Spirit” and we'll know if we're doing so by whether the fruits of the Spirit are evident in our actions (i.e. love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). Jesus taught that a good tree would bear good fruit and a bad tree would bear bad fruit (Matt. 7:17). This truth should cause us all to ask the question: what kind of fruit has my relationship with alcohol borne?

When we find ourselves in situations involving alcohol, the Spirit needs to be our Counselor and Helper (Jn 14:26). Too often we make decisions without so much as consulting God; this amounts to walking in the flesh, and such people “will not inherit the kingdom of God.” However, those who “keep in step with the Spirit” will be careful to not sow seeds of the flesh in how they treat others and their own bodies in relation to alcohol. They will be people who are thoughtful, empathetic, and respectful. They will exercise self-control (temperance), they will show forbearance to those who think differently, they will be gentle in their expressions, and they will treat each person as they would treat Jesus, or better yet as Jesus has treated them. So:

**Love like Christ,
Be temperate,
Walk in the Spirit.**

Galatians 5:1 says “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” My prayer is that you would thoughtfully and prayerfully consider what's been said in this article and let it aid you as you continue to experience his good gifts with thankfulness in your heart, living out the Gospel with a clear conscience and the fruit that comes from genuine pursuit of his good will.

Questions for Discussion

1. What part(s) of this article stood out to you most? Why?
2. What's your history with alcohol? What have you gotten right and wrong?
3. Of the three principles, which one has historically been hardest for you? What are some practical steps you can take that would help you grow in that area?
4. Do you have any accountability for your relationship with alcohol? If so, what's that look like? If not, are you open to it?
5. What questions do you have about alcohol and your (or others') interaction with it?

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For Focus Students:

A common question asked by students in our campus ministry is, “why does FOCUS ask small group leaders not to drink?”

One of the driving forces of campus ministry is upperclassmen welcoming underclassmen into their lives. Since the legal drinking age splits our ministry, we believe alcohol is generally not helpful to our mission. Additionally, alcohol is a factor in many sinful and destructive behaviors on college campuses; even the wider culture clearly holds that association. So we ask our small group leaders to commit to not drink around other students. However, this isn't meant as a law, but as a guideline designed to produce temperance and inclusivity. We invite student leaders to talk to their pastors in advance about outlying situations involving alcohol so they can make wise decisions that are loving and beneficial to the whole community.