

TOTAL ABSTINENCE: IS IT BIBLICAL?

by

Mrs. M. W. Dougherty



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The Bereans "were more noble than those in Thessalonica in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so" that Paul preached to them. Today we are to examine what the Scriptures say on the subject of total abstinence. I firmly believe that total abstinence is taught in the Bible. I count it a privilege to speak on this subject that has been assigned to me.

When I use the word *temperance* it is with this definition, credited both to Xenophon and to Aristotle: "Temperance is a moderate use of good things and total abstinence from things which are harmful." Webster's *Dictionary* gives total abstinence as one meaning of the word.

Romans 15:4 reads: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." Likewise, I Corinthians 10:11 declares: "Now these things happened unto them as an example; and they are written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages has come." (NASV)

Old Testament Examples

What do some of the Old Testament examples teach us? The first mention of drinking in the Bible

is in Genesis 9:20,21: "Noah began farming and planted a vineyard and he drank of the wine and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent." (NASV) Ham had an immoral relationship with his father and his son Canaan was cursed as a result. Recall that Lot unwittingly fathered offspring by his two daughters when he was in a drunken state. Nadab and Abihu may have been drinking wine when they offered strange fire, for immediately afterward it is recorded: "And the Lord spoke unto Aaron saying, Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation lest ye die: it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, and that ye may put difference between holy and unholy." (Lev. 10:9, 10) Belshazzar was rendered unfit for the defense of Babylon by alcohol and the city fell. Ahasuerus, king of Persia, under the influence of wine made improper demands of his wife Vashti, leading to her deposition. These examples show the harm and sin that resulted from drinking.

Positively, let us think of the young man Daniel who "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the king's meat nor with the wine which he drank." God honored and protected him in this courageous stand.

The Rechabites, a family of herdsmen, by pledge to their ancestral father Jonadab, were total abstainers. Even when the prophet Jeremiah, at God's command, brought them into the house of God, set wine before them and said, "Drink wine," they re-

fused. They firmly declared: "We will not drink wine, for Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, commanded us saying, 'You shall not drink wine, you or your sons, forever' And we have obeyed the voice of Jonadab, the son of Rechab, our father, in all that he commanded us, not to drink wine all our days." (Jeremiah 35:6, 8 NASV) This was to be an object lesson to God's people, a reproof for their unfaithfulness to God. God rewarded the Rechabites for their fidelity.

Old Testament Commands

What do we have by way of command in the Old Testament? It warns against the use of alcoholic beverages in Proverbs 20:1: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whosoever is intoxicated by it is not wise." (NSAV) Likewise, we are warned against influencing others to drink in Habakkuk 2:15: "Woe to you who make your neighbors drink, who mix in your venom even to make them drunk." (NASV) There is both command and warning in Proverbs 23:31,32: "Do not look on the wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly; at the last it bites like a serpent and stings like a viper." (NASV) Serpents and vipers are deadly things.

Wine may be any fruit juice, usually that of the grape, which becomes fermented through exposure to the yeast germs in the air in a 45-75 degree temperature, thereby producing ethyl alcohol. Carbonic acid gas is present when bubbles appear. During the pro-

cess, the juice of the dark grape, common in Bible lands, turns ruby red, indicating its alcoholic content. The verse in Proverbs is a solemn warning against even looking at fermented wine. Eve looked at the forbidden fruit; then she decided to eat it.

The sixth commandment, in what may be logically deduced from it, forbids drinking, for every drink causes brain cells to die and body impairment. The 28,000 deaths in auto accidents each year caused by drinking surely violate the sixth commandment.

Original Words for Wine

Young's *Analytical Concordance* lists 185 references in the Hebrew Old Testament where these words for *wine* are used: *chemer* and *chamar*, meaning a thick sticky syrup; *yayin*, meaning what is pressed out, grape juice; and *tirosh*, meaning new wine. About 135 references use the word *yayin*.

The Old Testament *yayin* has its counterpart in the Greek word *oinos* of the New Testament. Both words can mean either fermented or unfermented wine. One must judge by the context. The same Hebrew word can be translated either *kiss* or *bite*; one has to use a little judgment to decide which is appropriate. Bible translators need our prayers that they may make the right choice of words to convey God's truth.

In the Septuagint, the Hebrew word for grape juice, *tirosh*, is translated at least 33 times by the Greek word *oinos*, wine, and the adjective *new* is not

present. *Oinos* without qualification, then, can easily mean unfermented wine in the New Testament.

This Greek word *oinos*, found in 28 New Testament references, is used for fresh grape juice, raisins soaked in water, fermented grape juice (wine), or vinegar. Knowing this, why must we assume each time that our English Bible says *wine* that a fermented drink is implied? We have as much right to assume that wine is an unfermented drink as the opposition has to assume the contrary.

New Testament Examples

It would seem that the Lord's Supper has been carefully guarded to prevent such a misunderstanding, for the Gospel records in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and I Corinthians 11, both in the King James Version and the New American Standard Version, refer to the drink as "the cup" or "the fruit of the vine," different Greek words entirely than *oinos*. The word *wine* does not appear either in the English translation or the original Greek. It would seem better if the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms had stuck to Bible terminology; it would be less confusing. Since the fourth cup of the Passover was the one Christ used to institute the Lord's Supper, we believe it contained unfermented grape juice. Encyclopedia Britannica, eighth edition, page 333, under Passover, states: "The Rabbins would seem to have interpreted the command respecting ferment as extending to the wine as well as to the bread of the Passover. The modern Jews especially generally use raisin wine after the

injunction of the Rabbins." Prof. Marks of London University states: "At Passover and every other festival where the sanctification is pronounced over wine, the custom is to use wine prepared from raisins immediately before the celebrations." Parenthetically, may we say that the Jews had five ways to preserve grape juice for long periods in an unfermented state.

Another crucial passage is John 2, that tells of Jesus' first miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. It is sometimes cited as a basis for Christian acceptance of social drinking. I am not denying that several commentators do suppose that this was fermented wine here, but there are others who do not, Barnes for example. He comments on verse 10: "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine and when men are well drunk, then that which is worse": "It is not said of those that were present at that feast, but of what generally occurred. For all that appears at that feast all were perfectly sane and sober. 'Well drunk' cannot be shown to mean intoxicate." Jacobus and R. J. Miller had similar views. Pliny, Plutarch, and Horace described wine as good or best, which was harmless or innocent. Pliny said that good wine was one that was destitute of spirits. Josephus, Pliny, Plutarch, and Xenophon show that unfermented drinks were common in Palestine and were designated as the best wine. Barnes adds: "The wine referred to here was doubtless such as was commonly drunk in Palestine. That was the pure juice of the grape." A learned doctor remarked: "There has been much controversy over the wine at Cana, whether it was fermented or

unfermented. For me there has never been any question. If that had been fermented wine the guests never could have told that the best wine came last." Alcoholic beverages dull all the senses. Wine to people in our day means a fermented drink but we have no right to take that sense of the word and go with it to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Barnes adds, "No man should cite this instance in favor of drinking wine, unless he can prove that the wine made in the waterpots of Cana is just like the wine he proposes to drink." I am reminded of one of our good men in LaJuanta who answered the taunts of an infidel about Jesus making wine. "I will be willing to drink all the wine you can make out of pure water," he replied.

New Testament Commands

Now let us consider some of the New Testament commands. Ernest Gordon, former editor of *The Sunday School Times*, and author of *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, states that to translate the Greek words *nepho* and *nephalios*, found in nine passages in I and II Timothy, Titus and I Peter, as *sober* is a real falsification of Scripture. The basic and primary meaning of the words is to abstain from wine. Let us illustrate that from current Greek writings of that day. Herodotus wrote: "The Persians are wont to debate the most important affairs when intoxicated; but whatever they have determined on in such deliberations is, on the following day when they are *sober*, proposed to them by the master of the house

where they have met to consult, and if they approve of it when they are sober also, they adopt it." The Greek word translated *sober* in this quotation is *nephomen*. Porphyry and Josephus both used these Greek words *nepho* and *nephalios* in that sense. Lidell and Scott illustrate how their true meaning has been suppressed in Scripture. They give the verb *nepho* the definition "to drink no wine" with references to Plato, Herodotus, Sophocles, and a host of other writers. *Nepho* in its primary meaning, to abstain from wine, in these epistles to Timothy and Titus and in I Peter is translated "be sober" seven times, "be vigilant," "watch," sometimes. If this exegesis is correct we have plenty of commands to be totally abstinent. Baronius said, "The practice of abstinence was so widespread among the early Christians and prized so much, that in some places scandal was given if a Christian were seen to depart from it and drink intoxicating wine."

It is noticeable how Paul in the organization of the church dwells repeatedly on the importance of total abstinence among the leaders of the church. I Thessalonians 5:6-8 states: "Therefore let us not sleep as do others: let us watch and be sober (i.e. abstain from wine); for they that sleep, sleep in the night and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us who are sons of the day be sober (abstainers from wine) (*nephomen*). Watchful or vigilant could hardly be the proper translation here for it would be repetitious.

I Timothy 3:2 states: "An *episcopos* (elder or

bishop) should be *nephalim*" (abstinent), erroneously translated *vigilant*.

Titus 1:7 says, "A bishop must be blameless, not given to wine." One is reminded of what Clark Copeland said on the floor of Synod in 1972, explaining why our church requires abstinence of our church officers: "because an exemplary life is required."

In Titus 2:3, it is stated that the aged women are not to be given to much wine. Ernest Gordon says that the participle there is perfect, meaning "not having been slaves of much wine" or "not having an alcoholic past."

I Peter 1:13 in the King James Version reads: "Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind; be sober and hope to the end for the revelation of Jesus Christ." Ernest Gordon says that the correct rendering would be "Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, being wholly abstinent from wine."

Ending the list of the deeds of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21, we find *drunkenness* and *carousings* in the New American Standard Version. Paul then adds this solemn warning: "And things like these of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Webster defines *carousing* as a hilarious drinking party. That sounds like social drinking, what might be called moderate drinking, earlier stages than drunkenness.

In a similar admonition, Paul writes in Romans 13:13,14: "Let us behave properly as in the day, not

in carousing and drunkenness. . . . But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." (NASV)

Ephesians 5:18 reads, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit." (NASV) The word for *drunk*, *methusko*, is one of a continuing action and it implies that one is not even to initiate the action that might lead into a drunken state. Young defines *methusko*: to begin to be softened.

Sometimes those favoring moderate drinking point to I Corinthians 9:25, "Every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things." Paul is drawing his illustration from the Greek games. But the training of Greek athletes involved total abstinence from wine. This temperance Paul is referring to then included total abstinence from wine drinking. Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* said, "Greek athletes' diet consisted of cheese, bread and figs. Their only drink was water. Horace wrote: "The youth who would win the race hath borne much and done much. . . . He hath abstained from wine."

Ernest Gordon declares, "The old translators and commentators and for that matter many modern ones, were under the spell of alcohol superstition. They avoided in all these passages giving the true translation. They did so seeking to defend their cherished virtue of moderation in the use of what is really a dangerous poison. One should notice that nowhere in Scripture where drunkenness is denounced is moderate drinking spoken of with approval."

Paul's statement, "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak" should deter every Christian from drinking any alcoholic beverages. All agree that drunkenness is a sin, one that unrepented of bars from heaven. One out of every nine persons who drink ever so moderately at first will become an alcoholic; so the encouragement of one's example in drinking may lead another into undisputed sin. Augustine said, "Total abstinence is easier for me than so-called moderation."

Spiritual Effects of Alcohol

C. Aubrey Hearn* points out these ways in which alcohol brings spiritual blight:

1. Drinking makes people spiritually indifferent. One minister testified, "In a ministry now covering more than fifty years I have never yet seen or heard of a single individual who became addicted to alcohol, even in the mildest form, and retained a keen-edged spiritual purpose and a warmhearted, responsive spiritual interest."

An alcoholic who overcame the drinking habit with God's help made this observation: "Drinking keeps vast numbers of people away from God. Any drinking person will feel ill at ease in church. When he graduates into a constant drinker, he will usually leave the church completely out of his life. He gets so far from God that he finds himself not on speaking terms with the Master."

Isaiah wrote: "Woe unto them that rise up in the morning that they may follow strong drink, but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the works of His hands."

2. Drink weakens the will to goodness. Alcoholic indulgence is a sin against the body, which is God's temple. In Galatians 5, Paul admonishes Christians to walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh. Thus a person will avoid the works of the flesh, one of which is drunkenness, and bear the fruit of the Spirit one of which is temperance. Drinking encourages man's vicious appetites, obscures his vision of righteousness, and weakens the will to resist temptation.

3. Drinking dulls the edge of the soul's perception. Drink interferes with thinking. Alcohol attacks first the qualities of judgment, self-criticism, and self-control. In his book, *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master*, Peter Marshall declares that alcohol is one of the most potent weapons of Satan. A noted doctor testified, "I have never met a man or woman who indulged in alcohol freely who loved the truth or had any clear vision of the value of spiritual things. Its use is probably the commonest cause of spiritual blindness."

Aubrey Hearn concludes: "Because drinking leads to deterioration of religious interests, brings estrangement from God, separates the drinker from spiritual resources—in short—brings spiritual blight—the church member must abstain from alcoholic beverages as a life principle. But he must also be zealous in

teaching others the value of abstinence from alcoholic beverages. His spiritual life will be enhanced by his example in this regard."

Objections Considered

Now may we answer some objections. Some say, "Everything God made is good. He made alcohol, so it must be good. Material things are never inherently evil." This I would not deny, but I would ask, "Good for what?" Alcohol has many beneficial uses. It stands next to water in its usefulness in the chemical laboratory. But every good thing God has made has been misused by sinful man. Alcohol is a blessing in countless ways, but beverage alcohol is a gross misuse of God's gift and a curse to mankind.

Some say, "Christ drank, so it can't be sinful. Did not the Pharisees call Him a winebibber?" What does that prove? They also called Him a blasphemer, which was a lie if there ever was one. As we discussed incidents and texts earlier, I trust this accusation was answered in part. Remember that Jesus refused fermented wine on the cross. I do not say that I can explain every text dealing with this subject in the Bible; there are many puzzling texts, but my faith rests in Christ my Savior who was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners.

Another objection is that their wine had to be alcoholic because they had no way to preserve grape juice. Pliny describes grapes left on the vines to dry in the sun until they have lost half their weight. "When it is desired to use them, crush them, draw off

the juice and add well water half and half. This makes raisin wine." Origen said that in Egypt, wine was preserved by a film of olive oil over it. Dr. Samson tells of grape juice covered with a few drops of olive oil, put up in October 1879 and kept until February 1881. When tested at the Columbia School of Mines not a trace of alcohol could be found. The great classical authority on agriculture, Columella, describes another way to preserve grape juice. "Apply the press to the grapes, take the newest must, put it in a new container, bung it up, and cover carefully with pitch; then sink it completely in a cistern or pond of cool water. After forty days, take it out. It will remain sweet for a year." Another practice was to boil the juice till thickened, store it in skin bottles and keep it cool in cellars.

Our Present Duty

What is our duty then? Educate first in the home. Teach our children the ideal of total abstinence and the dangers of indulgence. Live that way before them. Educate in the church. This is sorely needed today. Had this been done faithfully the story today would be different. Educate through the press. Influence public opinion through an occasional letter to the newspaper in your locality.

Work to secure legislation that restricts and eventually abolishes the liquor traffic by writing cards and letters to our legislators and by building public opinion against the liquor traffic. Some object, "You can't legislate morals." Rev. Roy Holloman, long time head

of the Kansas United Drys, answered this objection by agreeing, "No, you can't legislate morals, but you can legislate outward conduct." This is a highly desirable end.

Then pray to Almighty God for the abolition of the liquor traffic that is our nation's number one drug problem, our number two social problem, our number three health problem, and our number four economic problem. Remember that the liquor traffic would destroy the church if it could and the church could destroy the liquor traffic if it would. Then pray for God's regenerating work in human hearts. Only God's almighty power can set one's feet in the right way and enable him to avoid everything in which evil appears and grow in that holiness without which no man may see God.

Horace E. Chandler, writing on "Let's Unmask John Barleycorn" in *Christianity Today* concludes: "But above all Christians must themselves see the problem in the light of the Bible. For Scripture demands reverence for our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit, as well as personal examples of temperance and abstinence before friends and neighbors. We need to get down on our knees before God in the battle against John Barleycorn."

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