**Is Moderate Use of Intoxicants Acceptable to God?**

*by Harry Osborne*

The Scriptures instruct, *"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good; abstain from every form of evil"* (1 Thess. 5:21-22). As Christians, we must prove things correct before we participate. We cannot justify our practice by saying, "It doesn't say not to." Instead, we must show divine approval for all we do. This assures that we "abstain from every form (or kind) of evil."

Surely no Christian would affirm that using intoxicants to the point of drunkenness is "good." The Bible clearly identifies it as sin (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:21; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:10). In depicting the state of "drunkenness" or the "drunkard," the Bible uses words from two different roots in the original language. Habitual intoxication is condemned by both words, but so is intoxication on a single occasion. One of the words goes further to describe the process of becoming intoxicated. Obviously, if the end state of intoxication is sinful, the process of getting there cannot be "good." We cannot "prove" intoxication to be "good," therefore, we cannot “hold fast” to the practice.

Normally, the question with Christians regarding the use of alcoholic beverages is not in the area of intoxication, but of the so-called "moderate consumption" of intoxicants. Is it acceptable in God’s sight for Christians to drink intoxicating beverages as long as they do not get drunk? That is the question we want to consider here. Remember, we cannot say, "It must be acceptable because no passage condemns it." We must "prove all things, hold fast that which is good."

One might suggest that 1 Timothy 5:23 would approve the practice. There, Paul told Timothy, *"*No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities.*"* Let us assume for the moment that "wine" always meant an intoxicating drink. (In reality, it did not.) The very best that this passage can do is suggest that it is "good" to use in a **medicinal** sense. It does not establish the practice as "good" in a general use. A parallel could be seen with the fact that sexual relations are good in the marriage relationship (1 Cor. 7:3; Heb. 13:4). However, that does not suggest it is "good" in any occasion outside of marriage. We must conclude this passage does not prove the social or recreational use of intoxicants to be "good."

Another passage used by some seeking to justify "moderate consumption" of intoxicating drink is Jesus turning the water into wine in John 2. The size of the six pots was given as “containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece” (Jn. 2:6). The Greek term for the size is “*metrētēs,*” which is equivalent to about 9 gallons, or 40 liters. Doing the math from the original Greek terms used gives us a total volume of 108 to 162 gallons, or 480 to 720 liters. Verse 10 says that the guests had already "well drunk" before this "wine" came out. If this had all been "wine" as we think of it, Jesus would have helped these people to drink in excess, not in moderation. In short, He would have helped them get totally plastered and sin! Surely no Christian would desire to take that position. A little bit of reasoning quickly leads us to understand that we must be missing something in our terminology as compared with the way the Bible uses the same words.

In order to get to the heart of this matter, it is necessary that we do a little word study dealing with Bible words. In the Old Testament, three words are significant to our study. The word ***tirosh***is rendered "wine" 38 times. It refers to "grape juice." It is used of the juice in the grape while still on the vine (Isa. 65:8) and of the juice flowing from the press, freshly squeezed from the grapes (Joel 2:24; Hos. 9:2; Prov. 3:10). Examples of those drinking this substance would show it to be approved. Isaac says God would bless Esau with much ***tirosh*** (Gen. 27:28).

The word ***yanin*** is used 135 times and also rendered "wine." It clearly has reference to wine that is fermented to some degree. About half of the times this word is used, it is clearly forbidden. When used for some non-drinking purposes (like sacrifice), it is sometimes clearly approved. No clear pattern exists to show approval of those drinking such.

The word ***shekar*** is used 22 times and is mostly translated "strong drink." It refers to an intoxicant from a source other than grapes or grape wine with the sugar content boosted to yield a higher than normal alcoholic content. ***Shekar*** is clearly condemned in the Old Testament.

Even though these words vary widely in meaning, they are all translated "wine" in some passages. It is interesting to note that every alcoholic beverage commonly sold in the U.S. would be in the category of the Bible word ***shekar*** - beer, whiskey, liquors, enhanced wines, etc.

In the New Testament, the words translated "wine" also vary in meaning. The word normally used is ***oinos*** which may refer to either fermented wine (Eph. 5:18) or the product coming from the “winepress” (Rev. 19:15). The other word is ***gleukos***. refering to "sweet wine whether fresh (unfermented) or highly intoxicating after fermentation." In short, we cannot assume the word "wine" refers to an intoxicating beverage in the New Testament just as we think of "wine" today.

Another fact to be considered is the way the ancients used the word "wine" in reference to a mixture of wine (fermented or unfermented) with water. One speaking to "wine" in that time meant **water mixed with wine**. To refer to straight wine, it was necessary to add the words "uncut," "unmixed," or "unmingled." It was considered a barbaric action to drink uncut wine. The mixtures of water to wine varied from 20 parts water to 1 of wine (given by Homer as ideal) to 3 parts water to 1 of wine (given in the *Talmud* for the Passover cups). The standard mixture was from 4 to 6 parts water to 1 of wine. Remember, this was the mixture whether wine was fermented or not (Everett Ferguson, *Restoration Quarterly,* 1970, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 141-153).

Now, let us assume for a moment that the "uncut wine" is fermented before mixing. Let us further assume that it is fermented to the maximum possible without enhancing which was about 6 to 8% given the grapes of that time. If one cut that mixture at a rate of 4 to 1, one would have to drink at the rate of 2 ½ to 3 gallons an hour to be intoxicated. That is why the Bible associates the word "glutton" with "drunkard" and condemns such (Deut. 21:20-21; Prov. 23:21). We may note that one so drinking would have grave problems in the stomach and bladder long before it affected the mind. However, it is a fact that drinking 2 beers, 2 cocktails, or 2 glasses of wine in even 2 hours would be twice as intoxicated as drinking the mixture above. The practice some seek to approve today is nothing close to what happened in New Testament times, even with the most liberal interpretation of possible events (R.H. Stein, *Christianity Today,* 6/20/75, pp. 9-11).

Modern alcoholic drinks would be condemned automatically by Bible standards. In the first place, most of them are made from something other than the grape. Second, the alcoholic content has been enhanced. U.S. wines commonly range from 12 to 16% in alcohol by volume! Third, the drinks are not cut after the fashion of Bible "wine." The only drinks that are commonly cut are the cocktails containing 20-25% alcohol by volume! No one that I know really wants to follow the practice in New Testament times even if we assumed the "wine" to come from a substance containing alcohol (See J. Free, *Archaeology & Bible History,* pp. 351-365).

Next week, Lord willing, we will continue a study of what Scripture says on this topic. We will see the New Testament condemns the process of using intoxicants going toward drunkenness.