

Holiday Spirits & Abstaining from Evil

by Harry Osborne

About this time of year, many people turn to the bottle to liven their spirits, thus bringing their eternal spirit under bondage to sin. Regretfully, they try to get others to participate in their foolishness. Those visiting the house of folly always want everyone else to come in as well. Therefore, the Christian continually faces the temptations to drink alcoholic beverages. Let us go to those Scriptures and see what God would have us to know about this subject.

First, let us deal with how we will approach a solution. The Scriptures say, "*Prove all things; hold fast that which is good; abstain from every form of evil*" (1 Thess. 5:21-22). As Christians, our place is to prove things correct before we participate. We do not justify a practice by saying, "It doesn't say not to." We must show divine approval for our practice. This will assure that we "*abstain from every form (or kind) of evil*." If a Christian is to participate in the drinking of alcoholic beverages, he must first prove that it is **good**.

Surely no one would seek to prove that the use of alcohol to the point of drunkenness is "good." Clear Bible passages show such to be wrong (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:21; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:10). In describing the state of "drunkenness" or the "drunkard," the Bible uses words from two different roots in the original language. Habitual intoxication is condemned by each, but so is the state of being intoxicated on a single occasion. One of the words goes further than that to describe the process of becoming intoxicated. Obviously, if the end state of intoxication is sinful (and it is), the process of getting there must not be "good." We cannot "prove" intoxication to be "good," therefore, we cannot hold fast to the practice.

The usual question for Christians regarding the use of intoxicants does not concern drunkenness, but the so-called "moderate consumption" of intoxicants. Is it right for Christians to drink alcoholic beverages as long as they do not get intoxicated? Remember, we cannot say, "It is 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. Paul there tells Timothy, "*Be no longer a drinker of water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine own infirmities*." We will talk about the problem of determining whether "wine" always meant an intoxicating drink in a moment. The very best that this passage can do is suggest that it may be "good" to use in a **medicinal sense** if we could assume this "wine" was an intoxicant. However, it does not establish that it would be "**good**" in a **general use**. A parallel is seen in the fact that sexual relations are good in the marriage relationship (1 Cor. 7:3; Heb. 13:4). However, that does not establish it is "good" in any occasion outside of marriage. Therefore, we must conclude this passage does not prove the practice under investigation to be "good."

Another passage appealed to by some justifying "moderate consumption" of alcohol is the case of Jesus turning the water into wine in John 2. The volume of the six containers is given as two or three firkins. That would be a total volume in our terms of about 138 gallons. Verse 10 says that the guests had already "drunk freely" before this "wine" came out. If this had all been intoxicating "wine," Jesus would have helped these people to drink in **excess**, not in **moderation**. In short, He would have helped them sin! Surely no one calling himself a 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 the Bible words regarding this subject. In the Old Testament, three words are of significance to our study. One word rendered "wine" is *tirosh*, used 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*, used 135 times, is also rendered "wine." In most cases, 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 purposes other than drinking, it is sometimes clearly approved. There is no pattern showing the clear approval of one drinking such. The word *shekar*, used 22 times, means "strong drink." It refers to any alcoholic drink from products other than the grape or grape wine in which the sugar content is boosted resulting in higher than normal alcoholic content. *Shekar* is clearly condemned in the Old Testament. It is interesting to note that most alcoholic beverages commonly sold in the U.S. would be in this category - whiskey, liquors, wines, etc. Even though these words vary widely in meaning, they are all translated "wine" in some passages.

In the New Testament, the words translated "wine" are also quite varied in meaning. The word normally used is *oinos*. This word may refer to either fermented wine (Eph. 5:18) or unfermented grape juice (Rev. 19:13-15). The other word is *gleukos*. It refers to "sweet wine whether fresh (unfermented) or highly intoxicating." Therefore, we may not assume that the word "wine" signifies an intoxicating beverage in the New Testament just because the word "wine" signifies such today.

Another fact that must be taken into account is the way in which the ancients used the word *oinos* or "wine" to refer to the mixture of wine (fermented or unfermented) with water. The ancient writer Plutarach clearly expressed this point:

"We call a mixture 'wine' (*oinos*) although the larger component part is water"
(Plutarach, Symposiacs III, ix).

When one referred to "wine" in New Testament times, he meant **water mixed with wine**. To refer to straight wine, it was necessary to add the words "uncut," "unmixed," or "unmingled" (See Rev. 14:10 "full strength" is literally "unmingled" in Gk.). 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* regarding the Passover cups of wine). The standard mixture appears to be from 4 to 6 parts water to 1 of wine (See 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. Let us further assume that it is fermented to the maximum possible without enhancing. Most sources say that was 5% maximum given the grapes of Palestine, though some others say 6%. If one cut that mixture at a rate of 4 to 1, a person 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). One drinking like this would have grave problems in the stomach and bladder long before the mind was affected. However, researchers tell us that one drinking two beers, two cocktails, or two glasses of wine in even two hours would be twice as intoxicated as the one drinking the mixture above. You see, the practice some seek to approve today has not the faintest resemblance to what happened in New Testament times even with the

most liberal interpretation of possible events (See R.H. Stein, *Christianity Today*, 20 June 1975, pp. 9-11). Ephesians 5:18 is also helpful in noting this distinction. It instructs us not to avoid "*wine, wherein is riot.*" Note that the wine associated with drunkenness had riot inherent in it. Why? Because it had a higher alcoholic content than the normal "wine" of the day.

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, their alcoholic content has been enhanced. Today's wines commonly range from 12 to 18% in alcohol by volume! Third, the drinks are not cut like Bible "wine." The only drinks that are commonly cut are the cocktails which still contain high alcoholic content after cutting. 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).

When one reads the admonitions of Proverbs 23:29-35 and 20:1, the nature of our conduct in this area ought to be clear: ***Stay away from it!*** Many have not heeded that admonition and have paid dearly. When the boss or a fellow-worker invites you to step into the house of folly at a party, decline. When a friend from school wants you to do the same, remember your God and His statements about this evil and say "**No.**" Drinking intoxicating beverages simply is not "**good**" as defined by the Scriptures, so we must abstain from it.