

Not Given to Wine

As the faithful men who are trusted with decision-making, the authority to delegate responsibilities, and the spiritual protection of the congregation in which they serve, elders must be qualified men who by their study and teaching of God's Word and by their own behavior have demonstrated to their congregation their dependable leadership skills. Most of the qualities and qualifications imposed upon these men by Paul are in his letters to Timothy (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and Titus (Tit. 1:5-9) and are required of all faithful Christians including the one that is the subject of our current consideration.

One of those qualifications is that an elder must be one who is "not given to wine" (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7). The KJV and NKJV render the Greek word "**me paroinon**" as "not given to wine." The ESV has "not a drunkard." The NASB: "not addicted to wine." The NIV: "not given to drunkenness." So, what does all this mean and how does this qualification require exemplary behavior from those men who are appointed as elders? To answer this, we need to understand the meaning of drunkenness in the New Testament. We need the standard set by Scripture, not by men, that Christians are to follow. Man's standard says drinking in moderation or social drinking is perfectly okay and even some followers of the Bible agree with this. First, let us establish that drinking, even in moderation, is a sin.

Commercials and ads for beer and liquor show young athletic people having a good time in some wonderful outdoor adventure. How accurate is this? Is it possible to drink responsibly? Abraham Lincoln said "alcohol has many defenders, but has no defense." We live in a no-fault society. We have no-fault insurance, no-fault divorces, and we often teach that alcoholism is a no-fault tragedy. Our society says alcoholism is a disease like chicken pox, mumps, or measles. We would never allow a company to sell a drink that would cause measles. Alcohol is different because it doesn't really contain a disease-causing ingredient.

In the U.S. more than 1 million people are in treatment for alcoholism. In 2014, according to the national highway traffic safety admin, 41% of all traffic deaths are alcohol related. Someone is killed in a traffic accident every 30 minutes because of alcohol. If a disease were killing this many people, our government would go to all lengths to find a cure or vaccine. Instead, alcohol is promoted and advertised everywhere.

Over 20 million Americans experience problems with alcohol and 12 million are alcoholics. Alcohol is involved in 50% of spousal abuse cases, 40% of child abuse cases, 65% of drownings, 54% of those jailed for violent crimes, and 49% of those convicted of murders or attempted murders had been drinking alcohol when they committed those crimes. Clearly, alcohol is a dangerous substance.

I am not going to focus on binge drinking and drunkenness, for nearly all agree those things are wrong, at least anyone who says they have respect for the Bible. Galatians 5:21 says, "envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you

in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” The problem is with what we call social drinking or drinking in moderation. That is where the argument starts.

Baptists and Methodists led the drive to prohibition but now allow drinking in moderation, including their clergy. Billy Graham changed his view and said the Bible did not teach teetotalism and said Jesus drank wine and recommended abstinence for social reasons rather than Biblical reasons.

Such ideas have made their way into the Lords church. Some believe it is now okay to have a beer or a glass of wine. To defend this practice, many arguments have been posed. Let’s consider some of these arguments.

The Bible Doesn’t Condemn Drinking in Moderation

Some argue that no verse in the Bible specifically forbids drinking in moderation and only drunkenness is condemned. But there are many things Scripture does not specifically condemn yet are still wrong. For example, heroin is not specifically condemned. That certainly does not mean Christians may use heroin, moderately or otherwise. Further, many things in the Bible are forbidden on principal. I do not believe that’s the case when it comes to drinking in moderation but rather that it’s forbidden specifically. But where? The answer is in every verse that forbids drunkenness.

A person might say, “I don’t understand. You’re saying that drinking in moderation is forbidden in the verses that discuss drunkenness?” Let me explain this. In Ephesians 5:18 the King James version says, “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.” Now the phrase, “be not drunk,” is translated from the Greek root word **methusko**. According to Young’s analytical concordance that word means, “to begin to be softened. It means “the marking of the beginning of methuo.” This word is called an inceptive verb. It is a word that marks the process of becoming drunk.

So what Paul is actually saying is do not begin the process of becoming drunk. And when a person consumes alcohol he is beginning to be softened. And that means social drinking is condemned in the verses that discuss drunkenness. The implication is people begin to be drunk when they begin to drink. I believe the reason people struggle with this is because of what they see or maybe I should say because of what they do not see. If they don’t see the person staggering or in a drunken stupor, then they don’t consider the person to be drunk. But that is not the Bible basis on which drunkenness is determined. Science and medical studies also bear out the fact that when a person begins to drink, they are to some degree, drunk.

How much does a person need to drink to be affected? As early as the 1960’s the **Journal of the America Medical Association** stated, “There is no minimum blood alcohol concentration which can be set, at which there will be absolutely no effect.” Somebody might say, “well that’s old, you know, we’re wiser now, we’ve had scientific advancements in the last 50 years.” Listen to this quote from the **Journal of the American Medical Association** from the year 2009. It says, “Although legal limits for blood alcohol levels have been set in most states, impairment in driving skills can occur with any amount of alcohol in the bloodstream.”

There is a website overseen by the University of Oklahoma police department. You can go to this website and put in your weight, what you are drinking, the length of time you've been drinking, the number of drinks and it will approximate your blood alcohol content. I did some samples for a 145-pound person. I put in one 5-ounce drink of wine. Drinking it immediately puts a person at 0.05% blood alcohol content. If you put in a 160-pound person having one drink of reduced alcohol beer (notice it's reduced alcohol beer), consumed over a one hour period, that person would have a blood alcohol content of 0.02%.

Now you might say, "that doesn't mean anything to me, what does 0.02% mean?" Another website called stopimpaireddriving.org says that at 0.02% blood alcohol level there is some loss of judgment, relaxation, slight body warmth, altered mood, decline in visual functions, decline in ability to perform tasks. Even the non-religious world admits that some amount of drunkenness, impairment, and loss of judgment occurs with one low alcohol content drink. Now, in light of that how can a Christian possibly defend drinking? With one low alcohol drink you are already affected and impaired. And it gets worse with each consecutive drink or with stronger drinks such as wine. And so, the Bible does condemn social drinking or drinking in moderation and it's in the verses that discuss drunkenness.

The Bible Only Condemns Excessive Drinking or Drunkenness

Let us consider another argument. Sometimes people will appeal to Ephesians 5:18 and they will say that this passage shows that alcohol is only wrong in excess, not in moderation. Let us consider this passage. The King James version says in Ephesians 5:18, "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." And so, the argument goes "see, drinking alcohol in moderation is not condemned—it is drinking it in excess that is condemned." This argument is based on a misunderstanding of the word "excess." The word doesn't refer to an excessive amount of alcohol. It refers to excessive or ungodly behavior. The American Standard says, "And be not drunken with wine, wherein is *riot*, but be filled with the Spirit" (emphasis added). I think that better conveys the idea. The idea then is this; don't begin drinking alcohol which brings ungodly behavior, but rather be filled with the Spirit which has the opposite effect.

Drinking in moderation has led millions of people to become immoderate drinkers, because alcohol is a habit-forming narcotic. Each drinker of alcohol is a potential alcoholic. Would God actually endorse the use of a substance that brings so much misery?

Drinking Wine has Health Benefits

Let's consider another argument that is sometimes made to defend drinking in moderation. Some say that drinking wine has health benefits. This is often used by people who want to defend their desire to drink wine. They will sometimes refer to a study that states that drinking one glass of wine per day is actually good for your health. They are referring to a study which says there is a chemical substance in wine called resveratrol which helps prevent cardio-vascular disease and cancer. The Mayo clinic website addresses this issue. It says,

"The American Heart Association does not recommend that you start drinking alcohol just to prevent heart disease. Alcohol is addictive. It increases your risk of high blood pressure,

high triglycerides, liver damage, obesity, certain types of cancer, accidents and other problems. In addition, even small amounts of alcohol can cause cardiomyopathy, weakened heart muscle, and heart failure in some people.”

Here is one more quote from Martha Grogan, a cardiologist at the Mayo Clinic. She said,

“Any benefit of the use of red wine for health purposes is due to a substance called resveratrol. Resveratrol is found in the skin and seeds of dark red and purple grapes. Resveratrol is also found in grape juice, especially juice made from the dark purple concord grapes. Recent studies have suggested that red and purple grape juices provide the same heart-healthy benefits of red wine.”

She goes on to say that,

“Both red wine and grape juice also contain antioxidants..., which have been shown to increase your ‘good’ cholesterol and lower your risk of clogged arteries... and may help lower blood pressure.”

So, it turns out the “health-benefits” argument is really a smoke-screen, and unfortunately just an attempt to justify a behavior one knows to be wrong.

Jesus Turned Water into Wine

Another argument that people use is to say that Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. First, when we see the word “wine” in the Bible, it does not always refer to an alcoholic drink. The word wine is a generic word, and it can refer to either fermented or unfermented juice of the grape. Now, some folks will point to a modern day dictionary where the word “wine” is described as alcoholic. But you only have to go back three or four decades to see dictionaries used to describe wine as either alcoholic or non-alcoholic. For example, the 1955 **Funk and Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary** defines wine as “The fermented or non-fermented juice of the grape.”

To know whether “wine” in any given passage refers to a fermented or non-fermented substance, we must look to the passage’s context. For example, Proverbs 23:31-32 says, “Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, when it swirls around smoothly; At the last it bites like a serpent, and stings like a viper.” That clearly refers to alcoholic wine.

Here’s an example of non-alcoholic usage. Isaiah 65:8 says, “As the new wine is found in the cluster, and one says, ‘Do not destroy it, for a blessing is in it, So will I do for My servants’ sake, that I may not destroy them all.’” Isaiah speaks of wine that is still in the grapes. It may be called wine, but if it is still in the grapes then it clearly isn’t alcoholic.

In these passages the same Hebrew word is translated by our English word “wine.” And the same thing is true in the New Testament with reference to the Greek language. In the New Testament there are five different Greek terms for wine. The one most used is **oinos**. The word is sometimes used to refer to fermented wine and sometimes used to refer to unfermented wine or grape juice. So, we cannot assume that because the word “wine” is used that it is alcoholic wine.

So what about Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding feast? If it was fermented wine, then it would seem Jesus endorsed drinking in moderation or social drinking. But first a person making that argument must prove it was alcoholic wine, which he cannot do. Second, the context indicates the wine was not fermented. Notice in this passage John 2:10, after Jesus had turned the water into wine the governor of the feast tasted it and said in verse 10, “every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!”

What is interesting to note is the phrase “well drunk.” This can be translated as “drunk freely or largely.” The way we would say it today is “they had all they wanted,” or “they had plenty.” Now if this were truly alcoholic wine these people would have already violated the passages that everyone would agree, prohibit drunkenness. And what we would have is this: if this is truly alcoholic wine, you would have a group of people who have drunk freely of alcoholic wine. They have drunk alcoholic wine until they had plenty. And then we would have Jesus making 120 to 160 gallons more of alcoholic wine for people who had already had plenty. How could the Lord forbid drunkenness and then do that? So, if Jesus turned the water into alcoholic wine, He didn’t just endorse moderate drinking—He endorsed excess and drunkenness! Clearly, this cannot be the case.

So, what’s the point of all this? The point is that the word **oinos** can mean either alcoholic or non-alcoholic wine. And the context of John 2 points to non-alcoholic wine.

The Difference in the Qualifications of Elders and Deacons

Here is another argument. First Timothy says an elder must “not given to wine” but a deacon is later commanded to “not given to much wine.” The argument is that this passage implies elders cannot have any wine but that deacons can have some wine if it is not too much. Thus, it is argued that these two phrases imply consent for deacons to drink wine in moderation. And if deacons can drink in moderation, then surely other Christians can also.

But warnings against excess can never be used as approval for the action itself. For example, in Ephesians 4:26 the Bible says “Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.” This verse is not approval for practicing wrath prior to sundown. First Peter 4:3-4 shows the error of this implied consent argument.

For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you (KJV)

Verse three mentions “excess of wine.” Some folks would say, “see that only condemns wine in excess.” Or they might argue that this verse implies consent for wine so long as it is not excessive. In other words, drinking in moderation is okay. But verse four mentions “excess of riot.” Now, if this implied consent argument is accurate then this verse would give divine sanction for riot in moderation. Certainly, that is not a valid argument.

Ecclesiastes 7:17 says, “Be not overmuch wicked” (ASV). Does this mean it is okay to be a little wicked, or to be wicked in moderation? James 1:21 says “Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness.” Does that mean it’s okay to be wicked as long as it’s not overflowing?

Back to the question of elders, deacons, and wine, let me show you where this argument will take you and how absurd this will get. Let us assume for a moment that it is true elders cannot drink at all but deacons can drink in moderation. Well, this same phrase that is applied to deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8 is applied to the aged women in Titus 2:3. And so the aged woman could also drink in moderation if this were true. But interestingly it is not applied to the younger women. And so, the younger women cannot drink. In addition, 1 Timothy 3:11 describes deacons wives as to be “sober.” The Greek word here means to abstain from wine. Titus 2:2 requires that the aged men be sober or to abstain from wine.

Now let’s put all this together and see what we get. Elders can’t drink at all, but deacons can. Older men can’t drink at all, but older women can. Deacons can drink but their wives cannot. Older women can drink but younger women cannot. Who would believe this? It is absolute nonsense. But that is where these arguments will get you when you try to defend drinking alcohol.

What About the Christian’s Influence?

If you’re still not convinced that the Bible prohibits all drinking there’s something else that I want you to consider, and that is your influence. When a person who professes to be a Christian drinks alcohol, he is doing something that even the world sees as an adult vice, and he greatly damages his influence. And he’s doing something even the world understands as wrong. He’s also doing something that’s going to make himself a stumbling block to young Christians and new converts.

In 1 Corinthians 8:10-13, the apostle Paul is discussing meat offered to idols. I believe the context is different because he is discussing something that is not in and of itself wrong. But of course those who argue for moderate drinking don’t believe that it is wrong. They believe that it’s not necessarily sinful. But listen to what Paul says in 1st Corinthians 8:10-13, he says,

For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? And because of your knowledge, shall the weak brother perish for who Christ died? But when you thus sin against the brethren, and would their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Now Paul is saying, someone may see me doing it and it may cause him to sin and in light of that I will never do that.

Matthew 5:16 says, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” You know it is going to be a lot harder to do that, in fact, I’d say it is going to be impossible to do that if you have an alcoholic drink in your hand.

Guy N. Woods, a famous preacher once said,

Any man, elder, deacon, preacher, or any person in the church cannot set the proper example of Christian living who engages in the use, in any degree, of that which has been the occasion of so much sorrow, grief and ruin in the world. Temperance in the use of harmful things is total abstinence. There is no such thing as a proper moderate use of drugs, alcohol, and other harmful substances.

Proverbs 20:1 says, “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.”

Conclusion

“Not given to wine.” That is a quality that must be present in anyone who might become an elder. It is something that we should see in a man’s life before he is able to lead the church. The role of an elder is to guide and protect the flock that belongs to Christ. The role is so important that the Holy Spirit has given us a list of qualifications or qualities that these men must have. “Not given to wine” is such an important quality that the Holy Spirit has seen fit to include it in that list. The world treats drinking alcohol flippantly. We should treat it as a command from God to abstain from such a sinful activity. A potential elder should be known for his sobriety and be a long-time exemplary example for the rest of the congregation.

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