

## **A Christian View of Recreational Narcotics**

Why “recreational alcohol”? Simply because the Bible recognises other uses for alcohol or narcotics.

It had medicinal uses (1 Timothy 5:23). It is described as an antiseptic (Luke 10:34). It was used not only to disinfect wounds, but to sterilise water. It was used as an opiate for the terminally ill (Prov 31:6). The matter under dispute is whether alcohol or drugs should be used merely for pleasure, as recreational drinks or substances.

The Bible has a great deal to say about alcohol, the most common and most abused drug. Some Christians tend to either regard drinking as normal, and are surprised that some Christians do not drink at all; others that abstain completely and are shocked that there are Christians who drink.

### **Scriptural Principles**

1. Christians are not to be drunk with wine (Eph. 5:18)
2. Drunkenness is a sin (Deut 21:20-21; Amos 6:1; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-20).
3. At least three groups in Israel were forbidden from, or advised against drinking alcohol: priests (Lev 10:9-10), kings (Prov 31:4-5), Nazarites (Nu 6:2-3)
4. The Bible also warns of the many dangers of drinking alcohol (Prov 20:1; Isaiah 5:11; Hab 2:15-16). Perhaps the most vivid biblical description of inebriation is found in Proverbs 23:29-35. The writer depicts the drunk as experiencing woe, sorrow, wounds and bloodshot eyes. Drunken people “behold strange women” and “utter perverse things.” Although the experience is like being sick or physically beaten, alcohol has such a hold on the drunkard that he seeks to indulge again as soon as he wakes from his stupor. A wise person will avoid wine because at the end it “bites like a serpent and stings like an adder.” Solomon advises his readers not to spend time among poverty-stricken, raggedy “winebibbers.” Perhaps the most well known warning about alcohol abuse asserts that “wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.” (Prov 20:1). The Bible conclusively condemns the abuse of alcohol.

### **What about the word “wine” in the Bible?**

The word “wine” occurs about 230 times in the Bible. The word can refer to fermented wine or to fresh grape juice containing little or no alcohol. The alcoholic content must be determined by the context in which one finds the word. The fact that wine is often used in a context of getting drunk (or making merry) indicates that in general the word “wine” refers to an alcoholic beverage. Even “new” or “sweet” wine had the power to cause intoxication (Hos 4:11; Acts 2:13).

### **Was Bible wine fermented?**

Since the process of distillation<sup>1</sup> was not discovered until the ninth century AD, any alcoholic beverage mentioned in Scripture would be so by natural fermentation. Ancient people were able to prevent fermentation through various processes, but most people did not bother. Freshly squeezed grape juice (called must or mustum) was often available and was a popular drink in Bible times. But generally speaking, wine was fermented.

---

<sup>1</sup> Distillation is the process of heating a material and condensing the vapor that comes off. Liquors like whisky and gin are distilled.

In Bible times wine was usually served mixed with water. Common mixture of wine with water was in ratios of 20:1 down to 3:1, which reduced the alcohol to less than 2%. There are references to this mixing of water with wine in several historical sources (2 Maccabees 15:39, Homer 20:1, Pliny 8:1, Clement (Instructor 2.2), Cyprian Epist 62.2.11). While the goal in the ancient world was to reduce the alcoholic content of beverages, the modern world has sought ways to increase it. Standard table wines have as much as 14% alcohol due to the addition of extra yeast and the control of the heat generated by the fermentation process.

They mixed wine with water because pure wine was almost like syrup after being stored and fermented for very long. Also, water was scarce and often impure. One easy way to purify water was to mix it with wine because the alcohol in the wine killed the germs in the water. It was considered barbaric to drink wine unmixed with water. It often took a great deal of drinking to get drunk because the alcohol content of wine was so low (around 22 glasses would have been needed).

Alcohol is the result of sugar decomposing (i.e., fermenting). Refrigeration was not available in biblical times, making the preservation of fresh juice a difficult project.

### **Strong Drink**

Twenty-two times the Bible uses the word “strong drink,” which comes from a root meaning “to drink deeply,” or “to be drunken.” Strong drink refers to intoxicating drink of any sort not made from grapes. Various concoctions made from pomegranates, apples, dates, barley, etc. were known to the ancients and must have been used in Israel also. Isaiah denounces those that “rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!” (Isa 5:11). He expresses his contempt for the priest and the prophet who “have erred through wine, and through strong drink are out of the way” (Isa 28:7). Isaiah assails the “greedy dogs” who say, “I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink; and to morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.” (Isa 52:12-13). Most of the alcoholic drinks of our society today would be considered “strong drink” by biblical standards because of their high alcohol content. Many modern wines have been strengthened (fortified) to increase their alcohol content and thus contain more alcohol than the wines of biblical times would have, especially once mixed with water.

Strong drink presents a danger, but it is not uniformly condemned in the Bible. A clear statement giving permission for the drinking of wine and even strong drink is found in Deuteronomy 14:26: “And thou shalt bestow that money for whatsoever thy soul lusteth after, for oxen, or for sheep, or for wine, or for strong drink, or for whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the LORD thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household.”

### **Should Christians drink alcohol?**

1. The abuse of alcohol is clearly sinful. One should never get drunk.
2. On the other hand, one must admit that several texts of Scripture seem to allow for and even commend the use of wine and/or strong drink (Deut 14:26; Ps 104:14-15; Prov 3:9-10; Ecc 9:7; Joel 3:18). Wine and strong drink are not evil in and of themselves. They do not cause drunkenness just as the presence of food is not the cause of gluttony. All sin proceeds from the sinful heart of man, not from part of the created order. The general tenor of biblical teaching is that wine, like any good gift from God, is easily abused: in this case, abuse involves addiction and drunkenness.

This leads to two possible positions:

1. **Moderationism.** Some Christians feel they have the right to enjoy alcohol in moderation. They argue that the Bible condemns the abuse of alcohol (drunkenness)

but not the moderate enjoyment of it. We must admit that the Bible does not absolutely prohibit the consumption of alcohol for the believer.

**2. Abstentionism.** Some Christians feel to avoid all of the serious problems associated with alcohol, the best policy when it comes to wine, beer and other alcoholic drinks is total abstinence. If one wants to live a holy, righteous, blameless lifestyle, abstinence from alcohol is a wise commitment to make. Refraining is not a biblical mandate but a choice to avoid the dangers, compromises and associations that alcohol represents. Drinking may be lawful, but it is not profitable (cf. 1 Cor 6:12). For one's own sake and for the sake of others, the best practice is to abstain from alcohol use.

- South Africa is an alcoholic culture. Drunkenness and the accompanying tragedies are common. In biblical times, drunkenness was not a major problem, especially in Jewish society. Drinking wine was more common but did not present much of a problem for most people.
- For those in Christian leadership, abstentionism is wiser. We are to avoid even the appearance of evil, to avoid tripping up weaker believers, and strive to be a godly testimony in a wicked culture. Because alcohol use and abuse is so closely tied with many sins, voluntary abstinence is the best policy for those who want to be above reproach.
- If you began your Christian life in abstinence, there is no reason to change and experiment with moderationism (1 Cor 7:20). On the other hand, the moderationist must keep evaluating if his use of recreational alcohol is being kept in a safe and prudent place in his life.

### Questions to Ask Oneself

- Is there a danger that a drinker may be brought into bondage? (1 Cor 6:12) Alcohol has a capacity to influence and control even strong believers. Those who abstain can never be enslaved by alcohol. Not drinking avoids the the risk of becoming addicted to alcohol. The risk of a casual drinker becoming a problem drinker is significant—one drinker in ten becomes an alcoholic. Abstainers do not run the risk of becoming alcoholic, but moderationists do. Every alcoholic drank moderately at some point.
- Not everything lawful is helpful (1 Cor 6:12). Ask: Are you fleeing temptation by doing this? (2 Tim 2:22) Does it make provision for the flesh? (Rom 13:14) Could Satan exploit this for evil ends? (Eph 4:27). Can you do it in faith (Ro 14:23)?
- Will it lead oneself or others to stumble or sin (1 Cor 8:10-11)? While you may have the drinking under control, are you certain that everyone who observes you has? The ex-alcoholic, whose conscience is teetering between total abstinence, and plunging back into alcoholism, may take your drinking as permission, and be destroyed. Only absolute certainty about another Christian's background and convictions could give you the knowledge to be charitable to him and drink or not drink in his presence.
- Will it confuse an unbeliever's understanding of the Gospel? Paul tells us that one kind of eating and drinking in the presence of unbelievers is permissible, but should the unbeliever associate your action with his unbelieving life, you should abstain for the sake of his conscience (1 Cor 10:27-28).

- Does drinking associate one with sinful elements of culture? Does it have the appearance of evil (I Thes 5:22)? Alcohol use is often associated in modern western culture with all manner of immoral conduct, and alcohol abuse is responsible for immense destruction, disease and death. Christians should not affiliate themselves with such corruption.
- Will drinking harm one's Christian testimony? One should not imbibe if doing so besmirches his reputation in the church or in the community. Does it adorn the Gospel? (Tis 2:10)
- With refrigeration, a plethora of non-alcoholic choices at hand today, the moderationist must ask himself what he seeks in alcoholic beverages. Is alcohol use necessary for one's enjoyment and relaxation? (Eph 5:18) If one's joy flows from a bottle, or if he needs alcohol to relax, he cannot claim to be merely a recreational user. If you are a moderationist, and are facing period of high stress, anxiety.

## Drugs

Drugs were an integral part of many ancient Near East societies. For example, the pagan cultures surrounding the nation of Israel used drugs as part of their religious ceremonies. Both the OT and New Testament condemn sorcery and witchcraft. In those days, drug use was associated with sorcery (the word translated "sorcery" comes from the Greek word from which we get the English words pharmacy and pharmaceutical). A witch or shaman prepared drugs. They used drugs to induce an altered state of consciousness that allowed demons to take over the mind of the user. In our day, many use drugs merely for so-called recreational purposes, but we cannot discount the occult connection.

Galatians 5:19-21 says: The acts of the sinful nature 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 live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The word witchcraft (pharmakeia) here is also translated "sorcery" and refers to the use of drugs. The Apostle Paul calls witchcraft associated with drug use a sin. The non-medical use of drugs is considered one of the acts of a sinful nature. Using drugs, whether to "get a high" or to tap into the occult, is one of the acts of a sinful nature where users demonstrate their depraved and carnal nature.

The psychological and potentially demonic effects of drug abuse should not be discounted. A questionnaire sent to marijuana users documented some disturbing findings. One-fourth of those who responded reported that they were taken over and controlled by an evil person or power during their drug-induced experience. And over half of those questioned said they have experienced religious or "spiritual" sensations in which they met spiritual beings.

Further, drugs like marijuana, cocaine and crack are illegal substances. The use, possession and sale of these drugs is against the law. Law-abiding citizens should not participate in the use of illegal drugs.

*Adapted from Brad Anderson*