

Questions I get asked: Christians and alcohol - 20210612

Hi all,

In the 1960's there was an American Christian couple who visited Germany on vacation, and were invited to dinner by a Christian German couple they had met. Their German hosts asked if they would like beer or wine with their meal, to which the Americans replied:

"No, thank you. We were raised that drinking alcohol is a sin. But we would like some coffee after dinner." Their German hosts were a bit surprised and replied: "We were taught drinking coffee was a sin."

Historical context once again

For those who know me, you know context is everything. So first, a little history.

All the ancient Mediterranean cultures diluted their wine - the Greeks and Romans usually 4 to 6 parts water to 1 part wine, the Jews the same - so about 16-25% of a cup would be wine, the rest was water. In the Odyssey, Homer mentions a 20 parts water to 1 part wine ratio.

Why did they dilute their wine?

The main reason is a bit counter-intuitive to you and I: There is a lot of ancient writing about using wine to purify water. The Roman historian Pliny the elder mentions the need to 'purify' the water by adding wine. It was more than wine being their drink breakfast to dinner, even for children and they didn't want to get drunk. It needed purified.

They added whatever they felt was needed to make the water taste better and to kill the bugs in it. Consider a local pond, river, or creek near you. What if that was your water source and you lived in ancient times and didn't know to boil the water and had nothing but cloth to strain it? What could you as an ancient do to kill the bugs in the water?

It was no doubt with this in mind that Paul urged Timothy: "Drink no longer water only, but add a little wine too, for your stomach's sake and your frequent infirmities." I Timothy 5:23

The instructions cautioning against too much wine therefore in the Word, in context, have to do with undiluted wine, the strong stuff - even Alexander the Great was known for not diluting his wine and being a horrendous drunk.

Anything God-given can be abused and misused. Sex. Marriage. Natural resources. Alcoholic beverages too. But there is nothing inherently evil about alcohol, or Jesus would have turned water into grape juice and Paul would have advised Timothy some other remedy. But lest one think scripture is saying alcohol is only good for medicinal purposes...

When Jesus turned water into wine

In John 2:10 in the wedding at Cana: "And said to him, Every man at the beginning brings out good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but you have kept the good wine until now."

The custom for the 7 day celebration of marriage was to serve the strongest wine - the less diluted wine - at the start when everyone's senses were sharpest, then serve the more heavily diluted wine as things went along. Jesus at the end of the feast turned the water into a higher ratio of wine to water, 'the best' or strongest wine for last.

Wine used in sacrifice to gods and goddesses in pagan temples

The issue of eating food that had earlier been sacrificed to an idol came up in Corinth and Rome. In I Corinthians 8, the whole chapter, and 10:20-33 Paul tells them an idol is nothing but God is everything. But not every disciple of the Lord has that knowledge. It bothered some that their brethren would eat/drink food previously sacrificed to an idol.

I've been to Corinth and the ruins of the central temple still stand. Around it were shops and restaurants. Like around a town square today with the county courthouse in the middle, there are always stores and restaurants there.

The stalls around the temple were roughly 10' across (3m) and maybe 15-20' deep (4-6m) - some were shops in their day, some restaurants, some meat markets. The meat from the temples would be sold to the shops and restaurants, which meant that steak with (diluted) wine you ordered maybe have been offered to Apollo or Athena 30 minutes earlier.

Is it okay for believers to eat and drink food used for sacrifice to an idol?

Some believers were eating the meat and drinking the wine without any care at all because they knew an idol is nothing. But to other believers, it bothered them, hurt their conscience. So Paul said that if you are going to eat by yourself eat what you want, but if you are going with someone who eats only veggies or abstains from idol-meat, then have the veggie plate yourself for their weaker conscience of your friend in the Lord.

In Romans 14 Paul broadens it a bit to include those who make one day more holy than another, or who eat only veggies rather than meat, who don't drink wine. He calls them 'weak in the faith'. But he says, what each person does they do unto the Lord, so don't despise them or criticize them, for they too are the servants of the Lord like you are. He said, "Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind."

In Romans 14:21 he again mentions not purposely putting a stumbling block before someone with a weak conscience, being sensitive to what they believe when you are at a meal with them: "It is good not to eat meat, nor to drink wine, nor any thing that would cause your brother to stumble, or is offended, or is made weak."

So that brings us to our day - and it is the same as in Paul's day.

Barb and I don't drink alcohol. That's our choice. Barb had alcoholics on her side of the family and my grandfather was an alcoholic who committed suicide when I was seven years old. We just don't want it around. But I've been to Russia in 1992 and had my host pour wine for all and we all drank it - including a 15 year old with us - and I told them to drink as it was unto the Lord and in His service - it would have offended our hosts not to.

It is as Paul said, a personal choice, let everyone be fully persuaded in his or her own mind.

The amazing thing about having Christ in us is that 'all things are lawful' (that are lawful) but not all things are expedient. I could drink, but because Christ is in me I have the power not to if I don't want.

But I hope that helps with context, history, and the Word in balance. New topic about things I get asked next week. Until then, blessings,

John Fenn

www.cwowi.org and email me at cwowi@aol.com