

SOCIAL DRINKING

The use of wine (strong drink) was universally customary among people living in Bible times. However, the Old Testament prohibited the drinking of wine by the Levitical priests while they ministered in the sanctuary (Lev 10:9) and certain groups, such as the Nazirites, made vows to abstain from wine. Jewish worshipers offered wine as drink offerings (Num 15:7; I Sam 1:24), wine was kept at the Temple for sacrifices (I Chron 9:29) and wine was given to strengthen the faint (II Sam 16:2). Wine represents God's provision and care: *"He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the labor of man, So that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine which makes man's heart glad, so that he may make his face glisten with oil..."* (Ps 104:15). Wine is also used metaphorically to describe God's blessing and goodness.

In the New Testament we find Jesus miraculously supplying wine for wedding guests and there is no reason to think He did not drink wine with daily meals as did His fellow Jews. Jesus shared wine with His disciples as part of the Jewish Passover. The drinking of wine is not prohibited in the New Testament, but rather, the principle of *moderation* is to be exercised. The Apostle Paul actually encourages the young pastor, Timothy, to *"use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments"* (I Tim 5:23).

The liberty to drink set forth in the Old and New Testaments is accompanied by strong warnings. Prov 20:1 states, *"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise"*. In even more graphic detail Prov 23:29-35 describes the woes of one who *"lingers long over wine"* (including: bloodshot eyes, contentions, seeing and thinking in distorted ways and suffering from what seems like the bite of a snake). Isaiah adds the woe, *"Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink"* (Isa 5:22).

There is the clear command that we are not to become drunk because to do so is be guilty of debauchery (Eph 5:18). One of the fruits of the Spirit is self-control and that is one of several fruits forfeited when one is under the control of alcohol. The Apostle Peter exhorts believers to reject the lifestyle of non-believers who engage in *"...sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries"* (I Pt 4:3). The Apostle Paul echoes Peter's exhortation in Rom 13:13, *"Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness..."*. Paul also gives the warning to not associate with drunkards (I Cor 5:11) who he says will not inherit the kingdom of God (I Cor 6:10). We should be careful to recognize that Paul does not mean we should never relate to friends or family members who struggle with alcoholism. By associate he means to be in a relationship where we are pressured or required to compromise our walk with Christ.

The pitfalls of drinking alcohol compel us to be circumspect in choosing our leaders and in deciding when and where to drink. The list of qualifications for elders and deacons includes, *"must not be addicted to wine"* (I Tim 3:3, 8). Because some fellow believers may struggle with their use of alcohol, we should be sensitive to what settings we decide to exercise the liberty of drinking. Love for our Christian brothers and sisters should prompt us to avoid drinking if there is the expectation that it may tempt or cause them to

drink and thus cause them to stumble, i.e. engage in *what for them* would be sinful behavior (it does not cause a brother or sister to “stumble” simply because we exercise a liberty they disapprove of). Rom 14:21 states, “*It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles*”.

So, while drinking is permissible, it carries with it cautions to be exercised in the church and in society. In the context of the local church there will likely always be folks who can maturely drink in moderation and those who struggle with alcohol’s addictive powers. In light of this fact, alcoholic beverages should not be served at any *official church sanctioned* corporate gatherings such as worship services, teaching sessions, prayer meetings or fellowship events. What a Christian does in one’s own personal gestures of hospitality with regard to alcoholic beverages should be left to the discretion and convictions of the individual believer. In society, we as the Church should honor the laws that govern age limits for drinking alcohol. We should also acknowledge that the governmental authorities who oversee the health and welfare of our nation report that alcohol abuse is the #1 substance abuse problem in America. Our own city’s university president has joined with university presidents across our land in seeking to curb the rampant abuse of alcohol among our college students. If societal leaders see fit to sound such a warning, then the Church should do so as well.