

# Rite Reasons

## Studies in Worship

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## Concerning Wine and Beer

### (Part 1)

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#### Part One: The Old Testament

“Drink is in itself a good creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness, but the abuse of drink is from Satan, the wine is from God, but the drunkard is from the Devil” – Increase Mather in *Wo to Drunkards* (1673).

1. The “wine” commended by God and used in moderation by the people of God in the OT is not “grape juice” but alcoholic wine and beer (Gen. 9:21; Ps. 104:14-15; Eccl. 9:7). Every word used to describe “wine” or “strong drink” (= beer) is used in contexts that connote their inebriating qualities (*yayin*, Gen. 9:21; *tirosh*, Hos. 4:11; *asis*, Joel 1:5; *shekar*, Lev. 10:9). Alcoholic content in the ancient world varied from about 5% to 20%. The low end alcoholic “New wine” (aerobically fermented) and inferior aged wine (anaerobically fermented using poor yeast and low sugar content grapes) were relatively abundant and inexpensive. High quality aged wine or “the best” as the master of the banquet called it (John 2:10) was rarely enjoyed by the common people.

2. The OT makes no distinction between alcoholic and non-alcoholic wine, warning against the one and commending the other. If “wine” really meant grape juice, then the authors of the OT would have used the Hebrew word for “grape juice”

(Num. 6:3). The fact is that the people of God drank the juice of the grape at all stages of its production – from the freshly pressed “must” and the aerobically fermented “new wine” to the anaerobically aged fine wine. It was all lawful for God’s people to drink, in moderation.

3. God not only allows believers to drink wine, He created it for them and commends it to them (Ps. 104:14-15; Eccl. 9:7). He promises to reward their obedience with the blessing of the abundance of wine (Dt. 7:13; 11:14; Prov. 3:10). The promised land is characterized as a land with the abundance of “grain and wine” (Dt. 11:14; 2 Ki. 18:32).

4. God is so far from discouraging the production of wine and strong drink that He commands that it be included as a necessary part of the sacrifices that his people offer to him (Ex. 29:38, 40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5, 7, 10; 28:7). Every believer had to offer wine as a necessary part of the sacrificial system. If he didn’t produce it himself, then he had to purchase it from someone who did. There was no escaping complicity in the alcohol business in the Old Testament.

5. God not only permits his people to drink wine, He virtually commands that they do so at at least one of the feasts (Dt. 14:22-26). God encourages His people to purchase “wine and strong drink [beer]” in order to “rejoice in the presence of the LORD.”

One should note the social nature of biblical drinking. The purpose of wine and strong drink is to foster joyful fellowship. In the Bible no one drinks alone. In America alcohol has been removed from the Lord's table and the family's table. Americans drink alone in order to escape. This leads to a nation of individual alcoholics. The biblical model for drinking tends in the opposite direction, helping solidify community and family ties through festive gatherings around various "common" tables, the Lord's table being at the center. (Once again, we read of the appropriateness of Israelites "purchasing" [Dt. 14:26] wine and strong drink in order to make merry at this feast. There is nothing unlawful, suspicious, or dangerous about the alcohol business in the OT.)

6. The solemn fact that such alcoholic wine is liable to abuse, is never used as a practical reason for total abstinence. Wine and beer are good gifts of God given to cheer the hearts of men (Ps. 4:7; 104:14-15; Judg. 9:13). The one who drinks must do so giving thanks to God and without abusing God's good gift (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-5). The three examples of abstinence in the Old Testament (kings, priests, and Nazirites) were temporary restrictions.

7. Wine and strong drink are not to be consumed when priests and kings are engaged in their official capacities (Lev. 10:9; Num. 6:1ff.; Prov. 31:4; Is. 28:7). Wine and strong drink are not to be consumed at work, but after work when one relaxes and rejoices in what God has done through one's labors (Gen. 9:21). The priests never drink wine in God's presence for vocational and symbolic reasons, just as they are never allowed to sit down. Their work is never finished in the tabernacle and temple. Jesus completes the work and sits down in the Holy of Holies to celebrate the completion of the priestly work. His saints join with Him in this celebration when they sit and drink wine in the Lord's special presence.

8. The OT portrays the coming joys of the messianic age in terms of the abundance of alcoholic wine (Is. 25:6; 27:2; 55:1; Jer. 31:12; Hos. 2:22; Joel 2:19, 24; Joel 3:18; Amos 9:13-15; Zech. 9:15, 17; 10:7).

9. When His people rebel against Him God withdraws the blessing of the abundance of wine (Dt.

28:39; 29:6; Is 1:22; 62:8; Jer. 48:33; Hos. 9:2, 4; Joel 1:10; Amos 5:11; Zeph. 1:13; Hag. 1:11).

10. Bread and wine are food and drink for kings: Royal fare (Gen. 14:18; Gen. 40; 2 Sam. 16:1-2; Neh. 1:11; Esth. 7:1, 2, 7, 8). When the Lord blesses Israel, a kingdom of priests, they can be found in abundance in the promised land.

11. Wine and strong drink are blessings of God, enjoyed by the people of God upon completion of their work and when the situation calls for the joy of feasting (Gen. 5:28-31; 9:21; Gen. 43:34; Dt. 14:21; Song 5:1; cf. John 2:10). Bread is Alpha food and wine is Omega food. You eat bread to strengthen you for the day's work and you drink wine to rest and celebrate the completion of work.

12. As a punishment for corporate sin, God curses disobedient cultures with drunkenness (Jer. 13:13-14; Ezk. 23:28, 33; Nah. 1:9-10; Hab. 2:15-16; Lam. 4:21-22).

13. God's solemn warnings against the *abuse* of wine and strong drink are not to be taken lightly. A life of drunkenness is a dangerous sin expressly condemned in the OT (Gen. 19: 32ff.; Is. 28:7; Ps. 78:65; Prov. 20:1; 23:20-21, 29-30, 33). (On the medicinal and anaesthetic use of alcohol, see Prov. 31:6-7. It would not be wrong to get a man drunk before performing surgery on him. We do the same today with anaesthetics.)

13a. Drunkenness distorts one's perception of God's world (Prov. 23:29-30; Jer. 25:16; Is. 28:7; Hos. 4:11; cf. Luke 21:34).

13b. Drunkenness destroys one's vocational capacity (Prov. 23:20-21; 31:4-5; Is. 5:22-23).

13c. Drunkenness is in violation of godly social behavior (Is. 28:7-8; Jer. 25:27; Ps. 107:27; Prov. 20:1; 23:29-30).

13d. Drunkenness weakens the body (Prov. 23:30, 32; Hos. 7:5).

13e. Drunkenness distorts judicial and moral discernment (Gen. 19:32; Lam. 4:21; Joel 3:3; Is. 5:11-12). [These last few points on drunkenness have been taken largely from Kenneth Gentry's book, *The Christian and Alcoholic Beverages* (Baker, 1986).]

14. These strong warnings against drunkenness notwithstanding, the OT never advocates the

prohibition of the use wine or strong drink as a defense against the *abuse* of alcohol. There is a clear difference in the OT between the use and abuse of alcoholic beverages. Prohibitionists and abstentionists condemn the use of all alcoholic beverages, arguing that the liability to abuse alone ought to cause us to refuse to drink. The Bible *never* argues this way.

This kind of reasoning is fallacious. It necessarily leads to a dangerous form of legalism. The Bible also warns kings against spending their strength on women (Prov. 31:1-3). Therefore, kings should abstain from contact with all women? Gluttony is often condemned in tandem with drunkenness (Dt. 21:20; Prov. 23:21). Therefore, abstaining from all eating is the best choice for the believer? Sexual perversion is also condemned along with drunkenness (Rom. 13:13; 1 Peter 4:3). Therefore, better for the really spiritual Christian to abstain from sex altogether? Sex, food, and wine can be abused; but they nevertheless are good gifts from God that can be used by the people of God when they are enjoyed in accordance with the righteous requirements of God (1 Tim. 4:1ff.).

## Part Two: The New Covenant

1. The New Covenant (which is not entirely new, but rather a transformation of the Old Covenant) radically changes only one aspect of the Old Covenant's teaching on wine and beer. That change has to do with a major advance in the sacramental use of wine. But before that change is explained, I should briefly highlight the *continuities* between the Old and New Covenants. It should be noted that the New Testament corpus is not only about one fifth of the length of the Old Testament, but the NT also presupposes the ethical/legal foundation of the Old. If changes result in the transformation of the Old into the New Covenant, they are made explicit in the New Covenant documents (as in the book of Hebrews). As for wine and beer, there is no discernible change from the Old to the New Testament with respect to the following points:

1a. Just as in the Old Testament, the "wine" commended by God and used in moderation by the people of God is not "grape juice" but alcoholic wine and beer (cf. Lk. 1:15; 5:29; 7:33-34; Jn.

2:3, 9, 10; Acts 2:13; 1 Cor. 9:7; Eph. 5:18; 1 Tim. 3: 3, 8; 5:23). There is not a shred of evidence from the first century or from the NT itself to indicate that "wine" in the NT was anything but alcoholic wine.

1b. Every word used to describe "wine" or "strong drink" in the NT is used in contexts that connote their inebriating qualities (*oinos*, Lk. 7:33-35; 1 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:7; 2:3; Eph. 5:18; *gleukos*, Acts 2:13; *sikera*, Lk. 1:15). The low end alcoholic "new wine" (aerobically fermented) and inferior aged wine (anaerobically fermented using poor yeast and low sugar content grapes) were relatively abundant and inexpensive (Jn. 2:10). High quality aged wine or "the best," as the master of the banquet called it (Jn. 2:10), was rarely enjoyed by the common people. It was reserved for special festive occasions, like weddings and sacred feast days (Passover).

1c. Just as in the OT (*shakar*, Gen. 9:21; 43:34 or Jer. 48:26), the verbs used to described drinking can refer either to "getting drunk" or to "feeling merry" (i.e. *methuo*, Jn. 2:10 or Acts 2:15).

1d. The NT makes no distinction between alcoholic and non-alcoholic wine, warning against the one and commending the other. I have heard it argued that the wine in the NT was severely watered down so that it was almost impossible to get drunk, that it was not much different than grape juice. That can hardly have been the case. How could the Corinthian church get "drunk" on severely watered down wine (*methuo*, 1 Cor. 11:21)? True enough, the people in the ancient world would water down wine for many of its uses, but not so much that it ceased to be "wine." Clearly, alcoholic wine (perhaps mixed with water) was used in the Lord's Supper in the NT.

1e. Since the OT portrays the coming joys of the messianic age in terms of the abundance of wine (Is. 25:6; 27:2; 55:1; Jer. 31:12; Hos. 2:22; Joel 2:19, 24; 3:18; Amos 9:13-15; Zech. 9:15, 17; 10:7), it is not surprising that the NT portrays the fulfillment using the same symbolism in the Messianic ministry of Jesus (Mt. 9:17; 21:33-46; 22:2; 26:29; Jn. 2:1-11; Rev. 19:19).

1f. Jesus Himself drank alcoholic wine (Lk. 7:33-35).

1g. Jesus instituted the New Covenant communion meal with wine, not grape juice (see *Westminster Confession of Faith* chapter 29.3 and *Westminster Larger Catechism* questions 168 and 169). Christ transformed the Old Covenant Passover meal into the New Covenant memorial meal by continuing the use of wine (Mt. 26:29).

It is true, the text of all three Gospels says that Jesus took "the cup," which was filled with "the fruit of the vine" (*genema tes ampelou*). The phrase "the fruit of the vine" is merely a poetic way of describing "wine." This equivalence is firmly and unquestionably established in the literature of the times. The Jews *never* used mere grape juice in their Passover cups. Moreover, the phrase "the fruit of the vine" became for the Jews a technical description of alcoholic wine when it was used in sacred ceremonies like the Passover.

1h. God is so far from discouraging the production of wine that He commands that it be included as a necessary part of the New Covenant sacramental memorial offering (Mt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:18; 1 Cor. 11:21-22). Every believer has to offer wine as a necessary part of the New Covenant sacramental system. In the New Testament church the believer would not have been at liberty to abstain from alcohol entirely. At least one day a week he was commanded to partake of bread *and* wine in God's presence with his brethren at church.

Once again, as in the OT so also in the NT, there is no escaping complicity in the alcohol business. No one ever even dreamed of using grape juice in the church's communion until the late 19th century in America. Wine has been used in the Lord's Supper by all orthodox Christians (Eastern and Western) until the 19th and 20th century temperance movement influenced many churches in America to change.

1i. As in the OT so also in the NT, the solemn fact that such alcoholic wine is liable to abuse (Eph. 5:18), is never used as a practical reason for total abstinence. Principled abstinence is never even mentioned in the NT save in the case of causing a brother to sin (Rom. 14:21). It is precisely the one who drinks who is "strong" and the one who mistakenly feels that drinking wine is sin who is called "weak." Wine and beer are good gifts of God given to cheer the hearts of men (Jn. 2:10). The one who drinks must do so giving

thanks to God and without abusing God's good gift (1 Tim. 4:1-5).

2. In the Old Covenant the priests and people could indeed drink wine and strong drink (= beer) but only *outside* of God's special presence in the tabernacle and temple. Priests and people were encouraged to rest from their labors and rejoice together with wine and strong drink in contexts *outside* of the sacramental worship instituted by God that took place *within* the tabernacle and temple. Wine and strong drink are not to be consumed when priests and kings are engaged in their official capacities (Lev. 10:9; Num. 6:1ff.; Prov. 31:4; Is. 28:7), and since no one who was not a priest was allowed into the tabernacle and temple's sacred space, no Israelite laymen ever drank wine in the special presence of God.

2a. The best of the new wine and beer was tithed to the central sanctuary every year and given to the priests to use (Ex. 22:29; Num. 18:12, 29; Dt. 18:4; 1 Chron. 9:29).

2b. The best of the wine was poured out to God as a drink offering of food on his altar outside of the Holy Place (Ex. 29:40; Num. 15:1-10). But the best of the fermented grain beverages (beer) was brought into the Holy Place and poured out in jars beside (or on) the face-table (Num. 28:7).

2d. Nevertheless, neither the priests nor the people were ever allowed to enjoy any of that wine or beer within God's tabernacle or temple where His special presence was manifest. In fact, it was strictly forbidden to the priests (Lev. 10:9), and the people had to pour out their offerings of wine at the altar (Ex. 29:40). ~~Their festive covenant meals, which did include wine and strong drink, took place outside of the environment of the tabernacle and temple.~~

(to be concluded)

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