
Rite Reasons

Studies in Worship

No. 49

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January, 1997

Concerning Wine and Beer

(Part 2)

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3. Why was wine and strong drink withheld from the priests and people when they were in God's special presence in the Old Testament? Why were the priests forbidden to drink wine and strong drink? Why were the men who took Nazirite vows (Num. 6:1-21; Lk. 1:15) and became temporary warrior priests forbidden to drink wine? Ultimately the answer has to do with the biblical significance of wine as symbolic of the blessing of God.

3a. As we saw in our discussion of the Old Testament, wine symbolizes God's blessings. He promises to reward His people's 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).

3b. God gives the gift of wine to His people as a reward for their patient and faithful work. Lamech called his son's name Noah, saying, "This one will give us comfort from our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground, which Yahweh has cursed" (Gen. 5:29). Lamech's prophecy is couched in the symbolic language of Genesis 3:17-19. Noah would bring about a typological deliverance from the curse such that man would enjoy *sabbath* rest as a result of Noah's ministry. The name "Noah" means "rest."

Lamech does not specify how this would come about, but the life of Noah fulfills this prophecy. Noah labored for 120 years building the ark and preaching repentance to the people (Gen. 6:3; 2

Pet. 2:5). He patiently toiled in the hope of rest. He trusted that God would eventually give his family rest after the flood. The first thing Noah does when he exits the ark is build an altar and lead his family in the worship of God (Gen. 8:20). Once Noah has given thanks for his deliverance he rests. "Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became sleepy and lay uncovered inside his tent" (Gen. 9:20-21).

This is in fulfillment of Lamech's prophecy. It is not a moral lapse on the part of Noah. His vineyard and the production of wine bring the promised rest and relaxation for the people of God. The story of Noah's rest after the flood is the first instance of the production and consumption of wine in the Bible. The story teaches us that wine is associated with Sabbath rest and refreshment. It is a picture of the prophetic blessings promised to believers when they patiently and faithfully work at the task God has given them. When a man's work is complete at the end of the day, he can relax and enjoy the fruit of his labors. Abraham is gifted with bread and wine by Melchizedek at the conclusion of his military campaign (Gen. 14:18). Wine is Omega or eschatological food - enjoyed at the conclusion of one's work (1 Cor. 9:7).

3c. Similarly, the Israelites who came out of Egypt looked forward to a feast of wine in the promised land. But it came at the *end* of their journey. It was given to them as a gracious gift upon the completion of their faithful service.

The book of Numbers, in anticipation of the Israelite occupation of the promised land, gives extended treatment to the "drink offerings" of wine and strong drink (Num. 6:15-20; 15:5-24; 28:7-24; 29:6-38). The descriptions of the sacrifices in the book of Leviticus do not even mention drink offerings because the Israelites were in the wilderness where there were no vineyards and consequently no wine (Dt. 29:6). They had to wait until they reached the promised land. Vineyards, grapes, and wine symbolized the blessings of patient, persevering faith, something all of the first generation lacked (Num. 14:29; 1 Cor. 10:1-10; Heb. 3:17). They never received the blessing.

Likewise, the book of Deuteronomy, delivered to the people of God on the verge of the Jordan river speaks extensively about the blessings of wine that will be enjoyed by the people in the promised land (Dt. 7:13; 11:14; 14:26; etc.). Wine is, therefore, associated with the promised blessings of the kingdom, the eschatological Messianic kingdom feast.

3d. The prophets pick up this promised-land symbolism and project it onto what they foresee as the future Messianic age. The eschatological Messianic kingdom (= the New Covenant) is characterized as a kingdom that abounds with 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).

3e. "Jesus made very clear the connection of the kingdom of heaven with the feast. He summarized the blessing of the kingdom as sitting at his Table, feasting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Mt. 8:11; see Lk. 14:15). Drawing on the Old Testament prophecies about the pilgrimage of the nations to the mountain of God (Is. 2:2-4), Jesus said that men will come 'from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God' (Lk. 13:29). The coming of the kingdom means that the nations of the earth will gather for a feast at the sanctuary. To inherit the kingdom is to enter into the joyous feast of God (Mt. 25:21, 23).

"Jesus described the kingdom as a wedding feast for a king's son (Mt. 22:1-14) and conferred the kingdom on His disciples in these words: 'And you are those who have stood by Me in My trials; and just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table

in My kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Lk. 22:28-30)." From Peter J. Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power* (P&R, 1993), p. 120.

3f. Now, putting all of this together, we are in a position to answer our original question: Why were priests not allowed to drink wine in the tabernacle and temple? Why were the people allowed to feast outside of the environment of the temple, but not inside? Why was wine systematically excluded from the Holy Place and Most Holy Place? Answer: The fullness of the kingdom had not yet come in the Old Covenant. The priestly work was not yet finished. The Old Covenant priests could never rest. There were no chairs in the tabernacle or temple. ~~There was no resting~~ from their priestly labor. They never enjoyed the fullness of the blessings of the kingdom. The priests reminded the people that the final form of the kingdom had not yet come. The blood of bulls and goats never took away sin (Heb. 10:4). Only with the priestly work of Jesus do the people of God enjoy the Sabbath rest associated with the completed work of Christ (cf. the book of Hebrews). The Old Covenant priests might not rest and relax in God's presence. They were forbidden to do so. They might not drink wine or strong drink in the tabernacle or temple.

4. Just as the priests might not drink wine when they were in the tabernacle or temple sacrificing, so neither did Jesus drink wine when He was performing His high priestly service on the cross (Mt. 27:34; Mk. 15:23). He did, however, drink wine with His disciples just prior to His arrest in Gethsemene ~~as well as after He was resurrected~~ (Mt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:18). Now that Jesus has completed His priestly work once and for all, He sits at the Father's right hand, resting from His work and inviting His bride into His presence to participate in His joyous and festive rest by eating bread and wine. The dinner Table that Jesus spreads before His people and at which He officiates is a Table of thanksgiving and rest, a covenantal memorial of His finished work (1 Cor. 11: 25-26). The New Covenant believer in Christ has full access to God's special presence and he can joyfully rest in His presence by drinking the sacramental wine.

5. The above is the essential biblical argument for using wine in the Lord's Supper. But it may be helpful to briefly re-phrase the argument for using wine in the church's communion. There are other considerations in addition to the biblical-symbolic thread given above that also ought to be considered.

5a. Wine is Omega food – gratefully enjoyed after one's work is accomplished (Gen. 5:20-21; 9:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:7). It is perfectly suited for the Lord's Supper. The believer appears in God's presence at the end of the week to present himself and his work to the Lord in Christ. He has done his best, offering it at the end of the week to his covenant Lord. Confessing his sin, the believer is nevertheless lifted up, forgiven, and his faithful work that week is graciously accepted by the Lord. The Lord then calls the believer to sit down at his Table and relax.

Enjoy the Lord's presence with the rest of His family! Rejoice in what the Lord has done for you! Rejoice in what you have done with the Lord's help! Drink wine and experience the shalom of the Lord! Wine is Sabbath drink. Eat bread so that you can receive strength for the coming week's work.

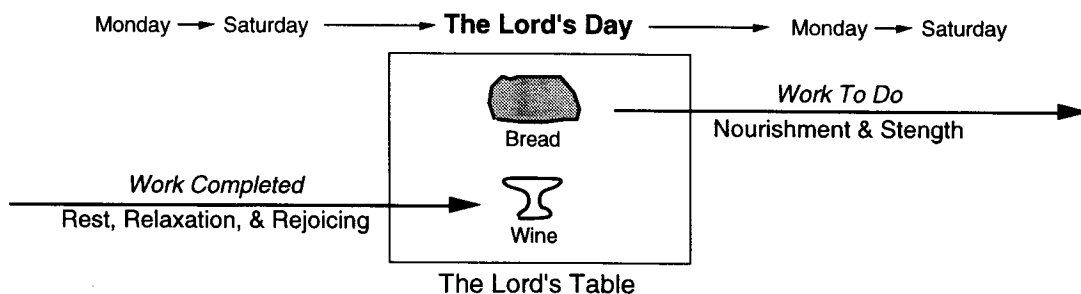
The important thing to note here is that the elements used in Lord's Supper are *fitting*. Bread makes sense. It is Alpha food. Wine makes sense. It is an Omega drink. Grape juice doesn't fit. People don't drink grape juice at the end of the day to relax and make merry, just as people don't eat flat, tasteless wafers at the beginning of the day for energy.

5b. Wine is a festive drink – merrily consumed upon festive occasions that call for joyous fellowship with one's family and friends. If the sacramental meals of the Old Covenant were meant to be festive and merry occasions, how much more the fulfillment of all of these covenantal meals in the Lord's Supper (Dt. 12:7, 12; 26:1-11; 27:1-7; Heb. 12:22-24)!

Now, of course, it is a dangerous thing to come to the covenantal meal with an ungrateful heart, both in the Old and in the New Covenant (Dt. 29:16-18; 1 Cor. 10:1-11; Heb. 6:7-8). Those who come to the Table in unbelief, refusing to acknowledge the Lord's grace, will be severely judged (Dt. 29:19-21; 1 Cor. 11:28-32). Nevertheless, the covenantal meal is intended to be a time of thanksgiving and rejoicing. The Lord's Table is such a festive occasion – at least it ought to be! Unfortunately, in Reformation circles we have dangerously overemphasized the introspective, contemplative aspect of Communion.

5c. The Old Covenant typological foreshadowings of the definitive New Covenant meal consist of bread and wine (Gen. 14:18, etc.). Again, wine is Omega food – enjoyed at the conclusion of one's labor (Gen. 5:20-21; 9:21-22; 1 Cor. 9:7). The fermentation of grape juice over time such that it matures into a fine quality wine is a fitting symbol for the maturation of God's kingdom from Old to New Covenant. The New is not completely new, but is a transformed, fermented Old. What the Old Covenant believers patiently waited for, but were not able to fully experience, has now arrived, and "only together with us" do they joyfully partake of the finished product (Heb. 11:40).

5d. Grape juice does not produce relaxation and merriment. Wine does. We are not merely supposed to *think* about rest and relaxation at the Lord's Table, we must in some measure *experience* it. What we eat and drink is important; otherwise, our Lord would have just told us to get together and contemplate these realities. He didn't. He instituted a supper with real food. The bread we eat actually fills our belly first; then, as a consequence, it triggers associations and a certain mental outlook. Similarly, the wine we drink goes down like fire-water and produces the feeling of "shalom" (peace) in our guts, which then leads the mind to give thanks and rejoice in God's gift of salvation.



The Lord said, "Do this as My memorial." He did *not* say, "Think about this" or "Contemplate this" or "Meditate on this" or "Theologize about this." He gave us something to eat and drink. This *eating and drinking* must come first and any contemplation, mediation, or theologizing must come *after* and as a *result* of the fundamental experience of eating and drinking. Here's how Calvin put it in his *Genevan Catechism*: "Q. But why is the body of our Lord figured by bread and His blood by wine? A. . . . by wine the hearts of men are gladdened, their strength recruited, and the whole man strengthened, so by the blood of our Lord the same benefits are received by our souls."

5e. The food we present on the Lord's Table ought to be the best. The bread ought to taste good. We should not use stale crackers or styro-foam-like wafers, but genuine bread. When the Lord instituted the supper, He "took bread," not crackers and not make-believe, flat, melt-in-your-mouth wafers. He took bread. Similarly, He "took the cup" and gave thanks for it. In that cup was wine, not grape juice. It was a festive occasion that called for fine wine, not cheap wine and not sour grape juice. When the Father invites us into His house to eat dinner with His Son, His Table is spread with choice food – robust bread that gives us strength and fine wine that induces a feeling of merriment and peace. "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him!" (Psalm 34:8). Unfortunately, in many churches members taste and see that the Lord is stale and sour.

6. The New Testament does have more to say about wine and beer:

6a. The "overseers" of the church in the New Testament are not to be "addicted to" or "enslaved to much wine" (1 Tim. 3:8; Titus 1:7). Compare the rules for kings in the OT.

6b. God's solemn warnings against the *abuse* of wine and strong drink are not to be taken lightly. Drunkenness is a dangerous sin expressly condemned in the NT (Lk. 12:45; Acts 2:15; 1 Cor. 11:21; Eph. 5:18; 1 Thess. 5:7;).

6c. Once again, however, just like in the Old Testament, the solemn fact that such alcoholic wine is liable to abuse, is never used as a practical

reason for total abstinence. The OT teaching that wine and beer are good gifts of God given to cheer the hearts of men (Ps. 4:7; 104:14-15; Judg. 9:13) is not modified by the New Testament. Jesus himself provides the means for such healthy drinking when He made wine for the wedding feast at Cana (Jn. 1:1-11). The one who drinks must do so giving thanks to God and without abusing God's good gift (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1-5).

Neither the OT nor the NT advocate the prohibition of the use wine or strong drink as a defense against the *abuse* of alcohol. There is a clear difference in both OT and NT 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 idea that those Christians who are careful to abstain from all alcoholic beverages are somehow more spiritual than those who don't. If anything, the New Testament says the opposite: Those who understand that there is no sin involved in drinking wine are called "strong" and those who mistakenly believe that drinking wine is sinful are called "weak."

"Do not suppose that abuses are eliminated by destroying the object that is abused. Men can go wrong with wine and women. Shall we prohibit and abolish women? The sun, moon, and stars have been worshipped. Shall we pluck them out of the sky?" – Martin Luther

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