

PRONOUNCEMENT

Alcohol



VARIOUS APPROACHES

For the AFM to reach a meaningful and comprehensive position on the use of alcoholic beverages, it is crucial that we understand the background to various approaches to this issue. We need to acknowledge that several factors influence our thinking and behaviour concerning the use of alcohol in the church.

First, although we may be members of a specific faith tradition i.e. Evangelical and Pentecostal, our interpretation of scripture vary from time to time and from place to place depending predominantly on the context in which the church finds itself at a particular time or period. It is an undeniable fact that throughout church history (Pentecostalism included) there has been development in Christian thought/doctrine. Particularly in Pentecostalism one of the reasons contributing to its fast expansions globally has been its pragmatic and practical adaptation to different situations (social-political and cultural) in the world.

Second, although the AFM is one church it comprises people, albeit born again and Spirit filled, who come from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds. For example, total abstinence from alcohol (even in the Lord's communion) has been the norm, partly because of the Zionist belief of Pieter L. le Roux (who later became the president of the AFM) and his Wakkerstroom Zulu Congregation. It is to be noted that PL le Roux was heavily influenced by the teachings of Alexander Dowie from Zion City in the USA who, in his monthly publication, *Leaves of Healing*, did not only promote divine healing (thus condemning taking of medicines and the consulting of doctors) but also the use of tobacco and the drinking of alcohol. To a very large extent, the teaching of abstinence from alcohol in the AFM can be attributed to the belief and behaviour of early Zionists in the USA and South Africa.

Third, although, on one hand, there is generally no doubt about the passion that different AFM communities have for Christ, there is, on the other hand, no denying that there has been differentiation in theological development due to socio-political and historical background in the South African society, including the AFM. Different outcomes in such a situation are bound to be manifest in biblical interpretation of various texts, including those referring to the use of alcohol beverages.

Fourth, the issue of culture is crucial in understanding certain thought patterns and behaviours. For example, some families of Euro-American descent may allow even their young people to take a glass of wine as part of a meal. The goal of such drinking is not

intoxication at all nor does it lead to drunkenness, something that is expressly condemned in the Bible. In such a case the responsibility lies with the parents to ensure that the taking of a glass of wine does not end in alcohol abuse. In the cultural context of such Bible-believing families drinking a glass of wine at a meal is not considered sinful nor a bad habit.

For the above reasons one should therefore be very sensitive and careful to lay down rules and policies and to become too prescriptive.

USE OF WINE IN THE BIBLE

The word *wine* appears over 200 times in the KJV Bible. Overall, what is the Bible's opinion of wine, and by extension, alcohol?

*On the one hand one gets the idea from the Bible that it was a normal, day-by-day cultural and social practice, even part of religious practices and festivals and a sign of the blessing of the Lord. On the other hand there are stern warnings against the **misuse** of it and the resultant drunkenness. The Bible speaks and warns more than 70 times against drunkenness.*

Old Testament

We begin with Old Testament evidence, and with three key words in Hebrew:

*tiros*h -- This word is translated "wine" in the KJV and "new wine" in some newer versions ("mos" in Afrikaans.) It refers to the initial squeezing of juice from the grape. As a rule it is used as referring to unfermented wine, although there are exceptions.

yayin -- This word is translated as "wine" in most versions of the Bible and is the word for wine most often used in the Old Testament. In most contexts it refers to a clearly alcoholic drink. *(It was wine with much lower alcohol content than the average wine today – less than 7%) It was often mixed with water – partly because of the cost factor and partly because of the seemingly purifying effect on water.)*

shekar -- this word does not appear often, but is translated in the KJV as "strong drink." It is associated with strong alcoholic drink. It appears to have been a product of other fruit like barley rather than grapes. In those days there weren't real high-alcohol drinks that were the result of distillation.

Seven other words in Hebrew are used but the above three words constitute the overwhelming majority of usages. *(There are too many texts to quote from the Old Testament. Only some in the New Testament will quickly be looked at.)*

New Testament

oinos -- this is the word most-used and more or less the equivalent of the Old Testament *yayin*. It was used for either wine or grape juice. In most cases one has to deduce from the context which is the case.

Several times in the Gospels, Jesus refers to oinos in parables. Texts where Jesus is associated with drunkards come from the mouths of adversaries out to discredit Jesus and no more proves that he drank alcoholic wine than his association with prostitutes proves he was a pimp, or his association with Pharisees proves he was a Pharisee.

Here are some passages cited as relevant:

Mark 15:23:

“And they gave him to drink wine mingled with myrrh: but he received it not.”

One can see how this might be used to advocate teetotalism, but it would also suggest an avoidance of myrrh (as an ancient painkiller) if we wish to take it that far.

Referring to John the Baptist *Luke 1:15* says: *“For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.”* (cf. 7:33) John the Baptist here is subject to a Nazirite vow, which - as with Samson - cannot be expanded to an all-time, all-person, all-amounts prohibition. This verse is the only New Testament mention of “strong drink.”

John 2:3ff *“And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine.”* This is the one that really gets the pot boiling, since if Jesus produced wine with alcoholic content, this is clear evidence that there is some leeway for consumption of alcohol.

Some argue from Hab 2:15: “Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbour...even to make him drunk”. The question asked is whether Jesus would be contrary to the aforementioned text, supplied alcoholic drink to people who were obviously already intoxicated?

An alternative argument is that the governor of the feast called the oinos “good wine”. Oinos is also used medicinally in *Luke 10:34* by the Good Samaritan. It is common knowledge that alcohol has certain purifying and antiseptic qualities.

Romans 14:21: “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak.” Paul is referring here to the use of meat and wine “or anything” in the context of those items being purchased from pagan markets where they were dedicated to pagan gods, and eating and drinking before those who find it offensive. Much of these had their origin in heathen temples. It is not a broad condemnation of eating flesh or drinking wine, but because of its connection with idolatry and the heathendom – something that was not a problem to Paul, yet he respected the fact that other believers might have problems.

Eph. 5:18: “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit...” Paul clearly admonishes against drunkenness here.

1 Tim. 3:2-3: "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach. Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous..." 1 Tim. 3:8: "Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre (cf. Titus 2:3). These verses suggest restrictions upon bishops/elders, deacons, and others in positions of authority in the church rather than an all-person, all-amounts prohibition. In a community where drunkenness and insobriety was the order of the day, Christian leaders should not be associated in any way with such life-style.

1 Tim. 5:23:" Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities." If fermented wine is meant here -- which is most *likely* -- this verse is a health recommendation, and a sound one prior to the advent of advanced sanitation, and does not involve getting drunk (a "little" wine -- the word means literally, "puny"). Oddly enough, oinos is mentioned most often in the New Testament in the book of Revelation, in the context of symbolising judgement.

THINGS TO BE BORNE IN MIND

In the light of the above the following must be borne in mind:

Alcoholic and non-alcoholic content of wine in the Bible.

It is a futile exercise to linguistically and theologically prove that wine in the Bible was either alcoholic or non-alcoholic. Ample reference to both grape juice and wine is evident with the majority of references pointing to (low) alcoholic wine.

Social and cultural usage of wine.

It is obvious that wine in Biblical times was a quite normal part of everyday life, culture and social/eating practice. Keep in mind that it was not as intoxicating as alcoholic drinks today and much larger quantities had to be consumed to really have an intoxicating effect.

Religious usage of wine.

Wine as such was often used as part of sacrifices and religious celebrations – no doubt with clear symbolic meaning. It is even remarkable that wine is a prominent element in the Eucharist. In the Old Testament wine is often times seen as a sign of God's blessing.

Wine made by Jesus.

There is no conclusive evidence that the wine Jesus made was alcoholic, or that He drank alcoholic wine, that the wine at the Last Passover was alcoholic or that the wine at early church's communion was alcoholic. However, taking all the theological, circumstantial and cultural evidences into effect, it points towards alcoholic wine in all these cases.

Medicinal usage.

Wine was commonly used for medicinal reasons. It is today a recognised medical fact that a regular, but limited daily intake of alcohol has definite health benefits – especially with regard to the cardio-vascular condition.

CURRENT FACTORS FOR CONSIDERATION

This all said, we must emphasise two points of relevance and caution in our present day context. This must be added in all responsibility – even though it is futile to try and prove from the Bible all references to wine is non-alcoholic or that wine was not part of the daily culture. There however are certain factors today that were not as prevalent in Bible times or not that clearly defined or understood.

Drug infested society.

In a drug infested and plagued society alcohol today is not only considered another drug, it is the most devastating one because it is easily and legally available. In ancient times the choice of fermented beverage was limited and by modern standards fairly weak. There was no equal to whisky or brandy, or anything that would deliver a knockout punch in a shot glass. Wine was often purposely diluted to prevent drunkenness while still enjoying it. There is no parallel to our easy access to beer, wine, or brandy every day of the week even at a supermarket. Being a drunkard in Bible times was not an easy habit; addiction was unlikely for all but the richest and most powerful (which fits in with the warning in Proverbs to kings – Prov. 31:4-6). Easy access to relatively cheap alcohol sharpens the warnings of the Bible and makes them even more serious today. Addiction is easier to fall prey to today.

Predisposition to addictive substances.

Although Biblical writers did not have the psychological knowledge of the syndrome of predisposition to addictive substances, it didn't prevent the Bible to accentuate the issue of the "weaker brethren". It is a fact of life that a certain percentage of any society is genetically more inclined to become addicted to intoxicating substances. Psychologists say some people are predisposed to become alcoholics (or drug addicts for that matter). This does not mean that such a person will unavoidably become addicted, they just have a greater than average chance to do. The problem is that one does not know beforehand who these predisposed people are. Fact is that we have one of the highest rates of alcoholism in the world, as well as various alcohol-related accidents, crime, domestic violence, fetal alcohol syndrome and marriage breakdowns. Given the clear prescription of both the Old and New Testament with regards to priests serving in the temple, the prescription about the soberness of elders and deacons, and in the light of our public image and the fact that we are not in temple service only from time to time, we are of the opinion that such discretion and sensitivity is the most, advisable, responsible and loving way that we as servants of God have to go – especially given the sorrow, poverty and destruction that alcohol is causing in our South African society.

CONCLUSION

The use of alcohol as such is **not** classified as a sinful offence. Drunkenness as a condition is unequivocally condemned as sin.

The stated **consequence** of alcohol use does include sinful offences such as drunkenness, addiction and immorality (as noted in New Testament texts such as Titus 1:7 and Ephesians 5:18).

THE POSITION OF THE AFM OF SA WITH REGARD TO THE USE OF ALCOHOL BY ITS MEMBERS

The church affirms that it recommends and advocates **abstinence** as the safest and most responsible approach to the use of alcohol.



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