

# THE USE OF WINE IN COMMUNION

At Grace Covenant Church “Unity to maturity in Christ” is more than a tagline. It is a succinct statement of the provision and purpose of the Gospel. All of ministry must be run through this scriptural grid. The issue of wine in communion is no exception. This article will consider the picture wine is of this very Gospel and why we have chosen to include wine in communion here at GCC. This is an endeavor to correct the faulty exegesis that led to wrongly excluding wine from the communion table. However, before exploring the picture represented by the wine of God’s provision and purpose, let us consider some important definitions.

## DEFINITIONS

Most Bible dictionaries agree that in Scripture the term wine is referring to fermented grape juice.<sup>1</sup> Because of the existence of natural fermentation in creation, for most of history, grape juice would only be available for a short time following harvest. The idea of non-alcoholic ‘wine’ is an option only recently offered. Thomas Bramwell Welch, an American physician and dentist, is credited with discovering the method of pasteurizing grape juice to halt fermentation. A strong supporter of the temperance movement, he produced a non-alcoholic ‘wine’ in 1869 to be used for church services in his hometown of Vineland, New Jersey.

Wine appears 237 times in 216 passages in the ESV either alone or with other designations including sweet wine, sour wine, new wine, mixed wine, and the single appearance spiced wine. (Song 8:2)

Because historical accuracy is lacking, context is again the most important factor in determining the use of these phrases in the Bible. 100 times the context is overwhelmingly positive. 77 times it is clearly negative while 60 times it appears neutral or unclear. In the last case a willingness to avoid dogmatic conclusions is suggested. Including these numbers is more than a mere vote tally.

There are at least 9 Hebrew words associated with wine. These include *yayin*, the most common. In koine Greek there are at least 4 words. Again, context would be paramount in determining how each word is being used. Since preservation methods as we know them were unknown and natural fermentation would begin almost immediately, the accepted starting point in interpretation should be the presence of some amount of alcohol unless the context clearly says otherwise. All biblical forms of wine were capable of producing intoxication.<sup>2</sup>

### *New wine, Sweet wine*

New wine is intoxicating according to Acts 2:13. “But others mocking said, ‘They are filled with new wine.’” In Nehemiah 8:10 sweet wine is a good thing. “Then he said to them, ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.’” It is not so in Joel 1:5, “Awake, you drunkards, and weep, and wail, all you drinkers of wine, because of the sweet wine, for it is cut off from your mouth.” Joel makes it clear that sweet wine is intoxicating and can lead to drunkenness. Even so, it is still a wonderful picture of God’s provision as seen in Joel 3:18, “And in that day the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk, and all the stream beds of Judah shall flow with water;

<sup>1</sup>Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). Wine. In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 2, p. 2145). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

<sup>2</sup>Cole, R. D. (2000). Wine. In D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers, & A. B. Beck (Eds.), *Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible* (p. 1379). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

and a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD and water the Valley of Shittim.” New wine appears in Hosea 4:11 in a list of sinful things Israel has chosen over God. The list includes “...whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.” Often the term wine appears as a metaphor for rebellion against God (Isa 65:11, Eph 5:18) and as a picture of God’s judgment. (Jer 51:7) Yet new wine is also a blessing from God, as described in Zechariah 9:17. “For how great is his goodness, and how great his beauty! Grain shall make the young men flourish, and new wine the young women.”

## PROVISION

God has provided wonderfully for His people. Wine is one of those provisions and so is evidence of the abundant goodness of God toward His people. (Deut 7:13; 11:14) As with any provision, man must use it wisely. Several narratives including Noah and Lot’s daughters show us wine can intoxicate and can, therefore, lead to sinful behavior. Scripture has numerous instances of this. Wine is a good gift from God and like any other good gift, can be misused. The problem with wine is not the wine itself but man’s propensity to abuse the good gifts of God. In addition to abusing wine, man abuses food, sex, money, time, etc. The problem is with us! In all these areas there is a need, not for abstention but for thanksgiving and self-control. Scripture condemns drunkenness but never the drinking of wine. This is an important distinction. Because wine is used as a picture or metaphor of God’s goodness to man, it is not surprising to find it used in worship. (Lev 23:13) In Genesis 14:18 we see Melchizedek king of Salem and priest of God Most High bringing out bread and wine to set before Abraham. When Isaac blesses Jacob, wine again is a picture of God’s abundant provision for His people. (Gen 27:28)

## PURPOSE

There numerous ways the Bible speaks to the use of wine. Wine itself is seen as a blessing. It is also common to find wine used as metaphors for both blessing and judgment. In addition, a correct understanding of the difference between prohibition and abstention are important to grasp the reasons God created wine.

### *Blessing*

There are numerous passages that portray wine as a blessing from God. (Psa 104:14,15; Jer 31:12; Hos 2:20ff) Isaiah 25:6 describes the future blessings of Israel that will fall on all people saying, “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.” It is difficult to imagine wine used as this kind of a picture for God’s people only to have God prohibit them from drinking wine altogether.

### *Judgment*

In addition to the blessings of God wine is a vivid illustration of God’s judgment. Psalms 60:3 says, “You have made your people see hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us stagger.” Psalms 75:8 says, “For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.” Mixing wine with water was cast in a bad light in Isaiah 1:22 where God declares, “Your silver has become dross, your best wine mixed with water.”

### *Prohibition*

The Bible describes times when select people are told by God not to drink any wine at all. This would be prohibited for reasons of the type of labor being described or a vow such as the Nazarite vow. (Judges

13:4) The Nazarite could drink after the period ended. (Num 6:20) In Leviticus 10:9 Aaron is told, “Drink no wine or strong drink, you or your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations.” Notice this prohibition was limited to their function in the Tent of Meeting as priests of the Most High God. The purpose was to clearly represent the holiness of God. The priest could drink wine as long as they were ‘off-duty’ as provided through the regular title of the people. (Num 18:28; 2 Chron 31:5) It is also important to recognize that Proverbs 20:1; 21:17; 23:30; 23:31 (and many others) all speak to the prohibition of drunkenness, not to drinking wine in moderation. What began as a prohibition for the Rechabites, turned out to be a judgment against Israel. In Jeremiah 35:14 we read, “The command that Jonadab the son of Rechab gave to his sons, to drink no wine, has been kept, and they drink none to this day, for they have obeyed their father's command. I have spoken to you persistently, but you have not listened to me.” Note that God did not give this prohibition but Rechab gave it to his family. God used it as an illustration for Israel’s lack of commitment.

### *Abstention*

In the absence of prohibition individuals may choose also to forego drinking wine for any number of reasons. Daniel decided not to take wine not because it was intoxicating but because it was used in idol worship. As Daniel 1:8 tells us “But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore, he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself.” Others may decide to do so for the sake of the danger it imposes upon a weaker brother. Romans 14:21 says, “It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.”

This would only be recommended if there was an actual danger of the weaker brother partaking of wine in violation of their conscience, having seen their brother partaking. This would defile their conscience. In the absence of such danger, there is no real reason to not drink wine “for the sake of my brother.” The preemptive concern that my brother *might* become a drunkard upon seeing another drinking in moderation is foreign to Scripture since those passages deal only with the danger of idol worship. We should be careful not to confuse prohibition with abstention. To do so may result in rules and regulations that go beyond Scripture. When my choice to abstain is treated by me as a ‘biblical’ reason for prohibition in another, the result is legalism.

The Apostle Paul has some helpful things to say about wine. 1 Timothy 3:8, “Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.” This statement is neither an abstention nor a prohibition to drinking wine. It is a prohibition to drunkenness. The same is true for Titus 2:3, “Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine.” 1 Timothy 5:23, “No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments” is a call to leave off abstaining for positive health reasons.

## CONCLUSION

As has been shown, wine is a permitted beverage in Scripture, used by our Lord and, it appears, by the church until the 1860’s. To reject that is to suggest that Christ is not sufficient by adding a law foreign to the gospel, which according to Paul in Galatians would be no gospel at all (Gal 1:6-9) and in Paul’s instructions to Timothy nothing less than apostasy. (1 Tim 4:1-5) Wine is a clear picture and symbol of the redemption found in Jesus Christ. Which is why the need to return to its use in communion.

### *Redemption*

Proverbs 9:5 records the call of Wisdom saying, “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have

mixed.” Here mixed wine, which is apparently stronger than regular wine is offered as a metaphor for the offer of salvation itself. (See also Isaiah 55:1) Jesus Christ is wisdom personified. Why would a clearly Messianic passage refer in a positive way to fermented wine if God meant to impose prohibition? Earlier, Proverbs 9:2 states of Wisdom, “She has slaughtered her beasts; she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table.” Many have used Matthew 27:34 to support prohibition by the Church. It says, “they offered [Jesus] wine to drink, mixed with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.” Yet later we read in Matthew 27:48, “And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with sour wine, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink.” Even the sour wine offered to Jesus would likely have some alcoholic content, if only watered down. It would be closer to vinegar. We would do well not to draw inappropriate conclusions from this event since it appears to be present to show the fulfillment of Psalms 69:21 which says, “They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.”

The same warning should be heeded for John 2:1-11. The purpose of the miracle of Jesus turning water into wine is not to afford us guidelines for the use of alcohol. It was to announce the arrival of the kingdom blessings. Amos 9:13, 14 describes this Messianic kingdom by pointing out, “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of grapes him who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.” Any opportunity to be reminded of this great promise should be welcomed, especially at the specific time devoted to doing that very thing in worship, communion.

### *Communion*

Jesus concluded his earthly ministry among his disciples with wine, representing the blood of the New Covenant from which comes our instruction regarding the Lord’s Supper. (John 13, Matthew 26:26ff) Therefore, after a long and careful consideration of Scripture the GCC elders have concluded that correcting the misunderstanding and confusion about wine and, alcohol in general, is in the best interest of God’s people. We submit ourselves only to the authority of the Law of Liberty. (James 1:25) The bitter, acidic flavor of wine, though repulsive to many serves as a picture of the bitter suffering of Jesus in securing our redemption. This is part of proclaiming His death till He comes.

