

ISSUE

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BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

March 13,
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Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn
Kyle Pope

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Arend Gressley
Ben Hight
Jack Langley
Blake McAlister
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



Does a “Don’t Drink” Gospel Hinder Evangelism? By Kyle Pope

RELEVANT is a religious online and print magazine published since 2002 targeting young evangelicals. Its Facebook page describes it as “the voice for spiritually passionate people” who are “20- and 30some-things... asking questions, seeking God, having fun and trying to impact the world around us.” In September 2014 RELAVANT posted an article by Preston Sprinkle, vice-president of the Boise Extension of Eternity Bible College, entitled “What Does the Bible Really Say About Alcohol?”¹ The article generated quite a bit discussion because it argued that drunkenness is the only thing Scripture condemns about drinking and those who advocate total abstinence are “pharisaical.” In a twist I had not personally heard before, Sprinkle argued that teaching abstinence actually impedes evangelism. He wrote:

A good chunk of the dying world that’s rejected Christianity hasn’t said no to Jesus, but no to a pharisaical version of Him. Some people have been turned off by the Gospel because they’ve thought that becoming a Christ-follower meant giving up having a beer with your friends after work. If this is the “good news” we preach, then the true beauty of a crucified and risen King will become covered in the fog of a man-made, pharisaical “don’t drink” gospel.

Jesus clearly taught the uselessness of “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9, NKJV), but is teaching a “don’t drink”

¹ <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/life/what-does-bible-really-say-about-alcohol>

message as part of obedience to the gospel truly man-made and pharisaical?

Is Drunkenness All That's Condemned?

The basis of Sprinkle's argument relies on some oversimplifications that sadly are now all too common in the religious world. Among these is the assertion that drunkenness is the only thing the Bible condemns about drinking. This is not accurate. In three passages drunkenness is paired with a word usually translated "**revelries**" that refers to celebratory drinking processions similar to Mardi Gras or tail-gate parties. Thayer defines its participants as "half drunken"—modern speech would put it, "they just have a buzz." Although this is not drunkenness as we usually think of it Scripture condemns it (Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:3) warning that those who do it "**will not inherit the kingdom of God**" (Gal. 5:21). One of these passages adds a third word, translated "**drinking parties**" that it lists among things Christians left behind in coming to Christ (1 Pet. 4:3). This word doesn't infer any type of intoxication, but describes conduct more like

the wedding reception where Champaign is served, or the back-yard cookout with cold beer shared among friends. Both "**revelries**" and "**drinking parties**" involve alcohol and both are condemned, but neither necessarily involves drunkenness as we would generally think of it.

Wine in the Ancient World

This oversimplification is fueled by some false assumptions about ancient drinks. Sprinkle writes, "Some say that wine in the Bible was nothing more than grape juice and therefore neither Jesus nor the Biblical writers advocated drinking alcohol." Some have made that argument, but that's not the full picture. The fact is the Bible and ancient writers used terms translated "**wine**" much more broadly than we do today. We *only* use the word "wine" to refer to fermented, intoxicating drinks. Ancient and biblical writers used it to refer to every product of the grape from grape juice (Isa. 65:8; Deut. 32:14; Num. 6:3, cf. Judg. 13:7; Gen. 40:11, cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 2.5.2) to vinegar (Matt. 27:34 NU; cf. John 19:29). This included fermented wine, but also drinks from grapes that were not intoxicating.

Sprinkle dismisses the ancient practice of dilution. He wrote, "Others say that wine was so diluted that it hardly contained any alcohol," going on to assert that this cannot "be substantiated by what the Scriptures actually say." It is correct that not all wine was diluted, and Scripture does not layout a recipe describing the preparation of various drinks, but the Bible was not written in a vacuum. It is abundantly clear that Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures regularly watered down wine (whether fermented or unfermented). They did this: 1) to extend its life; 2) to rehydrate boiled reduced wines, or 3) to inhibit intoxicating effects. This dilution ranged from proportions of 20/1 (Homer, *Odyssey* 9.208), 8/1 (Pliny, *Natural History* 14.6), or among the Jews 2 or 3/1 (Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 77a; *Pesachim* 108b). The apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees, written in the period between the Testaments claimed, "It is hurtful to drink wine or water alone... wine mingled with water is pleasant" (15:39). It is within this cultural background that we find biblical references to "**wine mixed with water**" (Isa. 1:22) and "**mingled wine**" (Song of Solomon 7:2, ASV)—using a word whose root means "to mingle (water with wine)" (BDB). The first clear description of the observance of the Lord's Supper after the NT describes the memorial cup as "a cup of wine mixed with water"

(Justin, *First Apology* 65). These facts are not the imagination of advocates of abstinence—they're part of the biblical and historical record.

Was All "Wine" Alcoholic?

Sprinkle acknowledges that "wine back then probably had a lower ABV [alcohol by volume content] than today's stuff" but dismisses the significance of this, arguing "people were quite able to get smashed by drinking too much of it" adding, "Still, the Bible never says not to drink it." There is no question there were alcoholic drinks in Bible times, but sadly many modern scholars have ignored the abundance of evidence that ancient people knew how to preserve grape juice unfermented. This was done not only to avoid intoxication, but pagan writers describe adding "must" (i.e. unfermented grape juice) to fermented wine to improve its taste.

This preservation of unfermented wine was done in a variety of ways. One was simply filtering pressed grape juice. This process significantly reduced the yeasts present in grape skins—a substance necessary for alcoholic fermentation. The Roman writer Pliny the Elder claimed the most suitable drink for all men was wine, "with strength reduced by the filter," even explaining the difference between "must" and fermented wine (*Natural History*, 23.24). The Greek writer Plutarch claimed that filtered wine has its "strike and madness taken away" leaving one in a "mild and healthy state of mind" (*Symposiacs*, 693b 3-5). Does the Bible refer to this practice? Yes. Isaiah speaks of "**wine on the lees, well-refined**" (Isa. 25:6, KJV, ASV). The word for "**well refined**" means, "to purify, distil, strain, refine" (BDB). The word translated "**wine on the lees**" literally means "something preserved" (Strong). Young's Literal Translation rendered this "**preserved things refined.**" "Lees" (or "dregs") in modern usage refers to sediment left after fermentation, but in Plutarch and Talmudic sources it referred to the residue from either the initial pressing of grapes or residue in later stages. Plutarch claimed filtering lees from an initial pressing prevented intoxication (*Symposiacs*, 692c 9-10). Sprinkle quotes this passage as "**well-aged wine**" (ESV, NLT)

and then defines it himself as "the stuff I only notice on the top shelf but can never afford." That makes the assumption that what the ancients considered *best* is what a modern liquor store would consider *best*. That's not necessarily the case.

A second way that grape juice was preserved unfermented was by boiling and reducing it. This concentrated the sugars into a jelly-like substance that would not ferment as easily. The Roman poet Virgil described housewives boiling down "sweet must" (*Georgics*, 1.295). The Mishnah records debates among Jews about whether boiled or unboiled wine should be used in the heave-offering (*Terumot* 11:1). While the Bible doesn't refer directly to boiling in some cases that is why wines were diluted—to rehydrate reduced wines. In light of this, biblical references to dilution may indirectly refer to this process (cf. Isa. 1:22; Song of Solomon 7:2).

Neither of these techniques are difficult to perform. I have personally conducted an experiment to scientifically test these claims and found that filtering and boiling (with no refrigeration) rendered sealed grape juice non-alcoholic for as much as a

year and a half.² Given the fact that ancient cultures practiced these techniques, yet referred to both “must” and fermented juice as “wine,” we cannot assume that every Biblical reference to wine was alcoholic.

The Meaning of “Strong Drink”

Sprinkle devotes an entire paragraph in his article to a discussion of the Hebrew word *shekar*, usually translated “strong drink.” He argues that *shekar* was simply “beer” and asserts, “*Shekar* had an ABV of around 6-12 percent,” going on to claim while the Bible prohibits its abuse:

... In moderation, drinking beer was encouraged (Proverbs 31:6). In fact, Deuteronomy 14:26 actually commands Israelites to use some of their tithing money to buy some beers and celebrate before the Lord.... They were also commanded to offer up two liters of beer to God six days a week and even more on the Sabbath (see Numbers 28:7-10).

Although Sprinkle doesn’t mention it as a source influencing his view, his wording

and argumentation is very similar to an article by Michael Homan that ran in *Biblical Archaeology Review* in 2010 entitled “Did The Ancient Israelites Drink Beer?” (36.5 (Sep/Oct 2010): 48–56, 78). Homan, like Sprinkle oversimplified the definition of *shekar*, equating it with the beers one might purchase in a modern liquor store. Six years earlier, however, in a version of virtually the same article in *Near Eastern Archaeology* Homan acknowledged that beers produced by one of the common ancient methods had an alcohol content of only 2-3% as opposed to modern beers of 5% and above (“Beer and Its Drinkers: An Ancient Near Eastern Love Story.” 67:2 (2004) 91). Ancient beers were often more like a porridge that one had to drink with a straw to filter out chaff. They were sometimes mixed with dates, honey, or spices and consumed by both adults and children. The ancient writer Xenophon even mentions that the strength of such beers would often be further diminished by adding water (*Anabasis* 4.5.26-27). In the early history of our own country something called “small beer,” or during prohibition a drink called *Bevo*, in a similar way were grain drinks that were not intoxicating. Even if we took *shekar* to refer to “beer,” we are clearly not talking about something equivalent to modern beers.

There are several problems, however with concluding that *shekar* was just a type of beer. First, Leviticus 2:11 prohibited offerings on the altar that contained “leaven.” The Talmud considered beer made from barley “leavened” (*Pesachim* 42a-b), and considered barley one of five grains subject to leaven restrictions (*Menachoth* 70a-b). Second, the Dead Sea Scroll known as *The Temple Scroll*, in a probable reference to the drink offering, declares, “pour out a libation of *shekar*, new wine, on the altar of the Lord, year by year” (11QT 21.10). Here *shekar* is used in a synonymous parallelism with “new wine.” That suggests that *shekar* (like other terms for wine) can be used broadly of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks and may simply be a generic term that sometimes included drinks from things other than just grapes. The unfortunate translation “strong drink” although common, is misleading. The process of distillation producing high alcoholic content drinks such as Vodkas or Everclears was not known in ancient times. That means that

² The complete report of this experiment is available at: <http://www.ancientroadpublications.com/Studies/BiblicalStudies/GrapeJuiceTest.html>

even the highest content alcoholic drinks of the ancient world were not like the fortified and distilled drinks of our day.³

Wine as a Blessing from God

Sprinkle also devotes a significant amount of time to considering passages where wine is described as a blessing from God. He writes:

Under the old covenant, wine is a blessing (Deut. 7:13; 11:14) and the absence of wine a curse (28:39, 51). When Israel looked to the future, God promises to flood them wine flowing from the mountaintops (Amos 9:14; Joel 3:18) and vats brimming with fresh wine (Joel 2:19, 24).

Sprinkle is correct that **“wine”** is spoken of as a blessing, and in some of these passages the generic term *yayin* is used (Deut. 28:39, Amos 9:14). I wish Sprinkle, however, had pointed out that in most of these passages the Holy Spirit does not use the generic term. Most use the word *tirosh* often translated **“new wine”** (Deut. 7:13; 11:14; 28:51; Joel 2:19, 24)—defined as “wine, fresh or new wine, MUST, FRESHLY PRESSED WINE” (BDB, emphasis mine). One uses the word *asis* also translated **“new wine”** (Joel 3:18)—defined as “sweet wine, wine, PRESSED OUT JUICE” (BDB, emphasis mine). These passages are speaking of the natural produce of the vine as a blessing from God—not the results of alcoholic fermentation.

What Christians Ought to Be

Sprinkle ends his article with some warnings to those he calls “young, restless, and slightly inebriated libertines” whom he claims “celebrate their freedom without discipline.” While I would differ with his assertion that drinking alcohol is a “freedom,” I am even more concerned that he treats so lightly the statement that these “libertines” (whom he claims are doing “great things for the Kingdom”) are “slightly inebriated.” To

determine that the Bible says about alcohol we must not only look at what the Bible prohibits but also what it commands.

Throughout the NT Christians are commanded to be **“sober”** and **“temperate.”** The word *nehpaleos* (or *nephalios*) various translated as **“vigilant”** or **“temperate”** means “abstaining from wine” (Thayer). It is used three times of elders (1 Tim. 3:2), elders and deacon’s wives (1 Tim. 3:11) and older men (Titus 2:2). The Greeks applied this word to wine-less offerings. The word translated **“temperate”** in 1 Corinthians 9:25 is “drawn from athletes, who in preparing themselves for the games abstained from unwholesome food, wine, and sexual indulgence” (Thayer). A qualification for elders is that they are **“not given to wine”** (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7)—from a word that literally means “beside wine.” Deacons and older women are commanded to be **“not given to much wine”** (1 Tim. 3:8; Titus 2:3)—which is just another way of saying **“not given to wine”**—it is not an allowance to be “slightly inebriated.”

So how would those living in an agricultural society, before the time of detailed product

³ For more on Homan’s articles and the meaning of *shekar* see my study “Beer in the Bible?” available at: <http://www.ancientroadpublications.com/Studies/BiblicalStudies/BeerintheBible.html>

labeling and the FDA fulfill these commands? They would take measures to guarantee that the drinks they consumed would not impair their sobriety. They would do this by either taking steps to prevent new wine from fermenting or watering it down if they feared that it already had. Today we may fulfill these commands by simply abstaining from any drink that is clearly identified as an intoxicant.

In Christ all Christians are considered priests who regularly offer-up **“spiritual sacrifices”** to God (1 Pet. 2:5; cf. Rom. 12:1). How can we ignore that under Mosaic Law priests during their time of service were to refrain drinking altogether in order to **“distinguish between holy**

and unholy” (Lev. 10:8-11). Is the priestly service of Christians of less importance? I appreciate that Sprinkle ends article with a word of caution, but to do so after devoting the bulk of his article to encouraging the drinking of alcohol is like telling someone to avoid lust after encouraging them to use pornography.

Drinking and Evangelism

I have no doubt that some do not obey the gospel because they want to drink alcohol. Unfortunately, the same is true of other sins such as sexual immorality, theft, dishonesty, murder, or covetousness. Each of these things set our own desires in conflict with the will of God. Jesus said, **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me”** (Matt. 16:24). Yes, we must never create man-made laws where God has not spoken, but neither should we weaken the demands Scripture has set in order to win converts. When all of the teachings of the New Testament are taken into consideration the clear evidence is that Christians should abstain from all intoxicants except when used for medicinal purposes (cf. 1 Tim. 5:23; Prov. 31:6).



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