

# Intoxicating Beverages

By Gene Frost

A reader writes:

"This is in response to your article, 'The Strong Drink of the Bible,' in the September edition.

"I agree the Bible nowhere specifically authorizes the drinking of intoxicating beverages. However, I am at a loss to explain 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7 if we are to say that to drink an alcoholic drink is a sin.

"The Greek word used in both verses for drunkard or given to much wine is *paroinos*, and means, literally, according to both Vine and Thayer, 'given to wine' or 'one who sits long at his wine.'

"Notice, the injunction is not against any use of wine, but against 'sitting long at' wine or being 'given to much wine.' Are these verses saying that an elder cannot be given to much grape juice? I don't think so. Why would God be interested in this? It must be that God is interested in elders not being drunkards, as most translations say or imply. This is a far cry from complete abstinence. God certainly could have found the words to say 'elders aren't to drink any alcoholic drink' if that is what he intended. The Greek for both of these verses do not infer abstinence, but in fact suggest that some drinking of alcohol-containing drink is acceptable.

"I must conclude that, while God does not specifically authorize drinking alcohol, he does not specifically rule it out either. This even though in these verses he had a particularly opportune time to do so. Instead of so doing, he makes a prohibition against being a drunkard.

"I do not suggest that every Christian should immediately begin drinking. In fact, there are good reasons not to drink alcohol, but these are personal or societal reasons and do not reflect an absolute rule of God.

"God's use of words in these verses suggests to me that the restrained drinking of alcohol is not sinful per se."

## Response

The writer reasons that although there is no specific authority for Christians to drink alcoholic beverages, he is persuaded that authority may be found in inference (though not necessary inference).

The reason that one cannot find specific authority for drinking (neither by direct statement, approved example,

or necessary inference) is because the imbibing of alcoholic beverages is specifically condemned. This was the import of our September article, "The Strong Drink Of The Bible." We looked primarily to the Old Testament because the Hebrew language has different terms to describe "wine" in its various stages, from fresh to intoxicating. That's why one can read of "wine," in our English translations, with approval and disapproval. By looking at the word in the Hebrew, we can discern that the "wine" *approved* is the fresh juice or a drink made from grape syrup, while the "wine" and "strong drink" *condemned* are by nature intoxicating. God specifically condemns drinking the intoxicating "wine" and "strong drink," the latter being the most alcoholic and relates to the beer of today. To escape the condemnation of drinking intoxicating beverages by the many statements of God, men have to *read into* the text the word "excess," or "over-indulgence," to make it appear that God only condemns *excessive* drinking, or drunkenness.

## What God Could Have Said

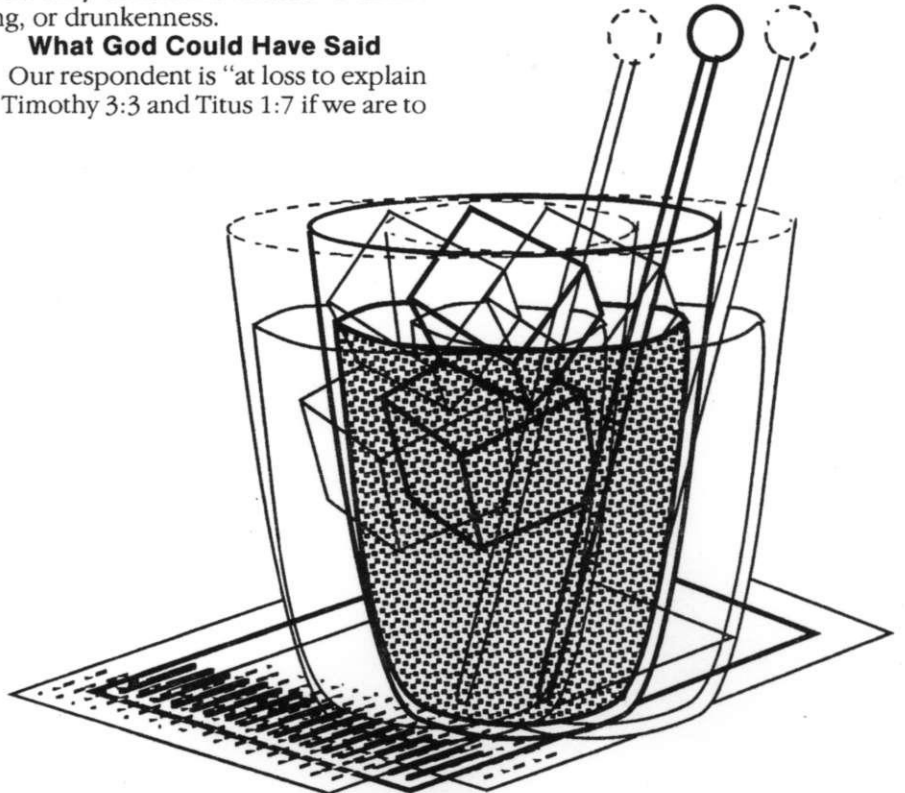
Our respondent is "at loss to explain 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7 if we are to

say that to drink an alcoholic drink is a sin," and adds, "God certainly could have found the words to say 'elders aren't to drink any alcoholic drink' if that is what he intended."

One must be careful in surmising how God should have expressed Himself in order to convey a particular conclusion. We have encountered religionists who assert that for a particular conclusion to be reached, God would have had to state it in a certain way, which they assume for God. Since He did not say it in their way, they argue that the particular conclusion is wrong. Their problem is in failing to understand what God did say, and consequently a failure to reach the particular conclusion. I hardly think that we are in position to tell God how He should have stated His revelation. Had God stated it like our respondent suggests, then no drink (liquid) with alcoholic content could be taken, even medicinally. Rather than fret over how God said it, let us understand what He did say.

## Is Anything Less Than Drunkenness Permissible?

It is pointed out that *paroinos* signifies one "given to wine" or drunkenness. Arndt and Gingrich add, "ad-



dieted to wine."<sup>1</sup> To the respondent, this means anything *less* is permissible. But is it?

Alcohol is a drug. When one admonishes young people not to become addicted to drugs, does this "suggest" that "some" consumption of drugs, in a social or recreational context (besides a controlled, medicinal use), is permissible? I think not. When I tell young people not to be addicted to drugs, I mean *don't start*. If one doesn't take the first drink, injection, sniff, et al., he will not become an addict. The fact that God speaks against sin in its full measure does not suggest that anything less is permissible. It only suggests what God says. We need to be careful not to read into what God says something more so as to conclude what He does *not say*.

The fallacy of supposing that when the full measure of conduct (in this case "drunkenness") is condemned then anything less is permissible should be obvious as we view other contexts. In 1 Pet. 4:3-4, Peter speaks of "excess of wine." Does this suggest that a little wine is permissible? If so, then "excess of riot" suggests that a little wickedness is permissible. Obviously, no such suggestion is there. Sin is not wrong only in its fullest expression, but all stages, from intent to the overt commission, are sinful. (Matt. 5:27-28)

The elder of 1 Timothy 3 is to be the husband of "one wife." Some understand this to be a prohibition against polygamy. For argument's sake, granting this to be the case, does it suggest that others may have *more* than one wife? Some reason that this is suggested. Such "suggestion" is imagination, not factual.

### 1 Timothy 3: Nephaios

As we look at 1 Timothy 3:3 (and Titus 1:7), note what is *said* Paul writes that an elder is to be "vigilant" (*nephaios*). Other translations render it as "temperate." (The verb form, *nepho*, means "to be sober.") Kittels's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says that the whole word group is formally negative, meaning that it is opposite of "intoxication." It is used in a literal sense of *not* intoxicated with wine.<sup>2</sup> A man is sober (*nephon*) "who is at the time completely unaffected by wine."<sup>3</sup>

Although the use of *nephaios* in 1 Tim. 3:8 is figurative, there remains the

"hint of the literal sense which does not come through so well in translation."<sup>4</sup> Edward Robinson notes that the word means "*sober, temperate, esp. in respect to wine,*" and is used in the N.T. to denote "sober-minded, watchful, circumspect."<sup>5</sup> James Donnegan defines it as "*that abstains, especially from wine; hence sober; discreet; circumspect; cautious - performed without using wine, as certain religious rites.*"<sup>6</sup> M.R. Vincent notes that "the kindred verb *nephein* means *to be sober* with reference to drink, and in a metaphorical sense, to be *sober and wary; cool and unimpassioned.* . . . The A.V. *vigilant* is too limited. Wise caution may be included; but it is better to render *sober*, as A.V. in ver. 11 and Tit. 2:2. . ." <sup>7</sup>Reinecker and Rogers define it as "sober, sober-minded, clear-headed. The word originally connotes abstinence from alcohol, but here it has a wider, metaphorical sense"<sup>8</sup>.

In 1 Thess. 5:6-8, Paul makes a contrast between drunkenness and sobriety (*nepho*) :

"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober..." (1 Thess. 5:6-8)

Note that Christians are to be sober: "not to be under the influence of drink."<sup>9</sup> The world is given to drunkenness. Does this suggest that while the world gets drunk, Christians may drink as long as they stop short of inebriation, wherever that line is? How can one avoid being "under the influence" while drinking socially or recreationally? The contrast between *sober* and *drunkenness* is not a contrast between drinking a little and drinking too much. It is a contrast between not drinking and drinking, the end result of drinking being drunkenness.

It may be observed that in both the literal and figurative senses the idea of free from the influence of wine is present. One's clear-mindedness, vigilance, etc., is that of one who abstains, one whose mind is not in the least befuddled, as drugged by alcohol. One doesn't have to drink in excess to become befuddled. From the first ingestion, one is affected: speech, balance, and judgment are impaired. This certainly does not suggest that one can be *vigilant* after imbibing alcoholic

beverages to any degree!

### 1 Timothy 3: Paroinos

In the list of qualifications for a bishop in 1 Timothy 3, Paul adds: "not given to," or addicted to, "wine." Some lexicographers, commentators, and translators understand that while *paroinos* retains the hint of the literal, perhaps here it is used in a figurative sense of "a brawler," as in the American Standard version. The King James version offers an alternate to the literal, in its notes: "Not ready to quarrel, and offer wrong, as one in wine." The verb *paroinein* is found in classical Greek (in Xenophon, Aeschines, Artisophanes, and Aristotle) in its figurative sense of "to behave ill at wine, to treat with drunken violence"<sup>10</sup>. It is found in the LXX in Isa. 41:12:

"Thou shalt seek them, and shalt not find them, even them that *contended with thee*: they that war against thee shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nought." (Isaiah 41:12)

Whether literal ("not addicted to wine") or figurative ("not a brawler"), elders are to be men who are free from the effects of wine-bibbing. This certainly does not suggest that it is permissible to imbibe wine, whether little or much.

### Alcohol Is A Drug

Remember that alcohol is a drug. There is a rightful use of drugs and a misuse of drugs. The Bible speaks of both.

The Greek word, *pharmakeia*, from which we get our English word *pharmacy*, refers to "*the use or the administering of drugs.*"<sup>11</sup> Drugs produce an altered state of mind. They were used by ancient sorcerers. In an appropriate setting, the devotees would invoke their deities while ingesting drugs. The psychedelic effect was considered a "spell" induced by the gods. The devil still deceives men with drugs. With or without the magical trappings of idolatry, mind-altering holds a fascination and apparently produces a pleasant experience temporarily. This is the attraction of alcohol today: people do not drink for nourishment; they drink because they seek the effects produced by alcohol. They continue because it is addictive.

*Pharmakeia* is uniformly condemned. (Rev. 9:21, 18:23, Gal. 5:20; see also *pharmakeus*, Rev. 21:8, and *pharmakos*, Rev. 22:15). The use of drugs for their

"recreational" effect is sinful. Whatever may be said of drugs, such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, etc., may be said of alcohol. Nowhere is it suggested that a little marijuana, or a little cocaine, or a little heroin, or a little alcohol is permissible, that their ingestion is wrong only when in "excess" (whenever that is).

"But wasn't Timothy advised to drink a little wine?" Yes, and we are told why. It was not to be social or to experience mind-altering effects. Timothy was told to no longer drink water alone, but to add a little wine for his stomach's sake and other physical problems.

"Drink no longer water, but use a little wine for thy stomach's sake and thine often infirmities." (1 Timothy 5:23)

The reason he was advised to drink was medicinal. Whether this "wine" was fresh juice of the grape or fermented is immaterial to the point, and that is, the use was medicinal. It was for his stomach, not his head. It was for the settling, healing, of his stomach, not for the befuddlement of his mind. Otherwise, Timothy practiced abstinence from all *oinos* (wine).

Observe that even though there is a wine (fresh grape juice, a drink made from grape syrup, fermented wine boiled to remove the alcohol) which is permissible, Paul advises that if this gives offense, would encourage one to sin in drinking, then do not even drink it.

"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." (Romans 14:21)

This does not suggest that one may drink alcoholic "wine" as long as no one cares, as long as no one is offended. In the first place, he is speaking of things that are permissible. Intoxicants are not permissible. Even so, if drinking *oinos*- even for the stomach's sake -- is offensive, Paul would not drink it. You see, the spiritual well-being of others is more important than one's physical well-being.

#### "Wine" Versus "Much Wine"

Though not stated in the letter of our respondent, we want to consider another argument which we have heard as frequently or more.

Some have been known to compare the "much wine" of deacons (1 Tim.

3:8) with the "wine" of elders (1 Tim. 3:3), and conclude that drinking is alright for others than elders as long as it is not "much." Comparing what is not compared is a very grave exegetical error. The inspired writer does not make this comparison; the one is not relative to the other.

Elders are not to be "a slave of drink" and the deacon is not "to be addicted to much wine."<sup>1,2</sup> Neither text allows addiction, whether the mind envisions one sitting long at wine or one drinking in quantity. The "wine" of verse 3 is not in comparison to the "much wine" of verse 8. The consequence of such a comparison, that some make, is that one may not sit long at wine, but he can be *addicted* to some wine as long as it is not "much." What proves too much proves nothing.

#### Wedding Feast

Another effort to justify social drinking - and we will conclude with this one -- is with reference to the wedding feast in Cana when Jesus turned water into wine. (John 2:1-11) Some have suggested that "wine" here is intoxicating wine. However, the Greek word "wine" (*oinos*) is a generic term, as is *yayin* in the O.T. The quality of the fruit of the grape, whether fresh or intoxicating, has to be determined by the context. Looking at the context, some suggest that it must have been intoxicating because they were "well drunk" (vs. 10). However, this does not refer to their physiological state, but to the act of drinking. The RSV and ASV translations have: "have drunk freely." Observe the fact that even after having drunk freely, the ruler of the feast was able to discern the superior quality of the "wine" Jesus had made. If they were drunken, they would not have had the sensitivity of taste to make this discernment. Further, the assumption proves too much. To assume that the "wine" was intoxicating and that the men had freely drunk, and were drunken, compromises Jesus. Jesus condemns drunkenness. (1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21: 1 Cor. 14:37.) Yet, if He made more intoxicating beverages for men already drunk to imbibe, He contributed to their sin, which is in itself is a sin. (Rom. 1:32, 2 John 11.) But Jesus did not sin; He did not make intoxicating beverages for men who were already drunk.

Jesus did not contribute to the delinquency of sinners. Therefore, the wine that Jesus made was a pure juice of the grape.

#### Conclusion

As one investigates, he finds that God disapproves of drinking intoxicating beverages.

"Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise." (Proverbs 20:1)

- 1 -- Arndt (William) and Gingrich (Wilbur), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the N.T.*, page 634.
- 2 -- Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the N.T.*, vol. IV, page 936.
- 3 - Kittel, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, page 940.
- 4 -- Kittel, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, page 941.
- 5 Edward Robinson, *A Greek and English Lexicon of the N.T.*, page 480.
- 6--James Donnegan, *Greek-English Lexicon*, page 876.
- 7 -- M.R. Vincent, *Word Studies*, page 1026.
- 8 -- Rienecker (Fritz) and Rogers (Cleon), *Linguistic Key to the Greek N.T.*, page 622.
- 9 Rienecker and Rogers, *op. cit.*, page 601.
- 10 -- Vincent, *op. cit.*, page 1026.
- 11 -- Thayer, *op. cit.*, page 649.
- 12 - Rienecker and Rogers, *op. cit.*, pages 622, 623.