

The Bible and Alcohol

Prof. Dr B.A. Zuiddam

Should traditional Christians, Roman and Reformed alike, stop drinking alcohol? Many Christians in diverse cultural situations do not drink at all. A good reason for reflection. What does the Bible say? What does alcohol do to our body?

It is not only some Baptist or Wesleyan groups that reject drink in principle. In Africa, where I am connected to a university, drink is basically unacceptable to most black Christians. When I was teaching at a black seminary, one of the rules said that alcohol consumption for personnel was forbidden. I had a double feeling there. As a New Testament scholar, I was aware that Jesus had changed water in wine, not the other way around. The fact that it was not purely grape juice is evident from the words by the master of ceremonies about the practice of putting the best wine first. Only when the senses have become affected by the drink, and the people are "well drunk", says the 17th century Dutch Bible (Jn 2:10), the lesser wine follows.

Jesus Drank and I also

The ban on alcohol impressed me as legalistic and un-Biblical. The head of the seminary was able to follow my reasoning. For my part, I did not want to give black Christians any offense or cause for temptation. So, we agreed that I would not drink on the university campus where I was boarding but could perceive my own responsibility for the Lord elsewhere. That was difficult because at the time I drank a good glass of red wine regularly to aid my digestion as part of my recovery from wrong medications and lack of stomach acid. Following the Apostolic commandment: "No Longer drink water alone, but use a little wine, for thy stomach and weaknesses." (1 Tim 5:23)

Our Lord drank too. The Pharisees referred to Jesus as a "wine-purifying" because he apparently had no objection to a glass (Mat. 11:19, Luke 7:34). It has always surprised me some Christians deal quite selectively with the famous Sheldon-question "What would Jesus do?" Unlike John the Baptist, he would just have taken one. At least that is the impression that the Gospels leave. Why should you try to avoid the obvious? If we do so anyway, what makes us any different from liberal theologians who become ventriloquists for the prevailing culture and moral preference of the day? In addition, I found alcohol tasty, or thought I did. What else is a delicious, top-fermented Trappist beer than a good gift from our creator? Moreover, the drink, whether it was wine or beer, constituted a bond with places that were dear to me in the present and past, especially when I found myself abroad, sometimes for years on end.

Weeping on the bus

Yet there is also another side of alcoholic beverage. I was confronted with this early on when I was a young journalist travelling by bus in a Christian region in the Netherlands. An elderly lady was sitting next to me with tears in her eyes. She was conservatively dressed, and she was most likely Christian, either Reformed or Roman Catholic. We got to talk. Soon it emerged that she was quite devastated because her husband's drinking. Apparently, he could not leave the gin alone. Apart from the emotional pain that she radiated, she looked to be on the receiving end of domestic violence as well. A Christian newspaper in Holland recently stated that one in five traditional Christian families harbour someone who is severely addicted to drink. This is better than average, but still a huge problem. With all the additional complications that seem to come with substance abuse.

These do not limit themselves to hang overs and a greater risk of all sorts of nasty diseases. Several studies show that sexual crimes, such as incest, occur in many cases under the influence of alcohol. The same is true of suicides. Both are understandable from a chemical and psychological standpoint. Alcohol is a depressant. Amongst other things, it suppresses the part of our brains that helps us to apply moral discernment.

Therefore, Proverbs 31:4-7 warns: " 4 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: 5 Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. 6 Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. 7 Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more. "

Downward spiral

However, on the longer-term alcohol does nothing positive for depression. Initially, it makes you feel better, but then the feeling decreases. The first sip tastes nice, if you're used to it at least. This can give a good feeling after a long tiring or stressful day. Your body will take about an hour to process the alcohol. Then the alcohol will leave a vague sense of uncertainty, self-reproach or even of despair, depending on for how long you have been drinking. This is mostly chemical in nature, comparable with a vitamin D shortage in dark and gloomy winter.

Fact of the matter is, that when the alcohol is worked out, you feel worse than when you started. Most people do not notice this, because they would have taken a second glass within that hour, which counters the negative effects of the first glass working out. It helps you feel good but without the initial exhilaration. But that too is temporary, which is why these are easily followed by a third and fourth glass (or more). After that, we usually don't notice how heavily the body needs to work on cleaning, because it's often time to go to sleep. A deep but short sleep follows. However, experts tell us that this is not a healthy sleep. The invigorating laps of good sleep in which the body recovers from all that we do during the day are reduced by the alcohol from circa seven to two. Drink is therefore an attack on your sleep and your health. This applies to "binge-drinking" but also to moderate use. Even one glass disturbs your sleep. The next day you are more irritated and tired, even without hangover. It takes up to five to ten days for your body to rid itself from all alcohol traces and for the duration you will remain extra susceptible to this vicious circle and the chemical attraction of alcohol, not even speaking about psychological conditioning and patterns that form in the brain after years of drinking. It is so much more seductive to take a glass again by the end of the next day to regain the good feeling. This creates a downward spiral. It seems like drinks are doing something positive for you, but in reality, you are worse off after consuming them.

Many drinkers are waking up four to five hours after they have gone to bed. This is due to the anaesthetic having worked out and the resulting rush of blood sugar and adrenaline through your system, because of the imbalance that the depression by alcohol caused. But the deep sleep has not refreshed. On the contrary, the result is best described by the "depths of misery" of the psalmist (130:1). The heart rhythm that was suppressed by the alcohol suddenly rages on, even though you are lying on bed and do nothing. A sense of worthlessness and despair takes over your mind.

You are not unique. It happens, sooner or later, with all drinkers. At four o'clock in the morning everyone is sorry and wants no more alcohol in his or her life. Even without headaches or "excessive" use you can have a mental hangover. But as the next evening approaches, or by the time it becomes Friday night, our selective memory again ignores what was so obvious only days or hours earlier, and we choose to take that first glass again. After that, we don't have a free choice anymore. The vicious circle continues.

Alcohol as poison

That is not because we have become alcoholics or are genetically much different than ordinary people. That kind of theories quickly leads to unfair stigmatisation. It is often intelligent and involved people who drink too much and fall into this spiral. The blame for this lies in the chemical effects of alcohol as drugs. It is the drugs that leaves a feeling of emptiness that calls to be replenished. This leads to inner conflict and literally being in two minds who battle it out. Because the short-term effect helps us, we continue; but are left with an increased dose for the same effect over time...

The reason for this is because alcohol is a poison. If we were to drink it pure, we would drop dead after consuming it. Many alcoholic drinks have a large sugar content, a substance that has several addictive similarities in its effect on the mind. But by gradual exposure to increasing doses of poison, our body can survive. Almost no one who drinks for the first time loves the taste. Children usually find liquor nasty or bitter. It is a "acquired taste". There is a reason for that. Our body protects us by warnings via taste or smell against substances are bad for us. Also, the vomiting after heavy drinking is a natural mechanism to empty our stomach and protect the body from harm.

King Mithridates VI of Pontus (134 to 63 BC) is known to have swallowed small amounts of lethal poison to make himself immune against murder attempts. When he later wanted to commit suicide to prevent him from falling into the hands of enemies, there was no poison that had enough effect. So, he then had to ask a soldier to put an end to his life. Alcohol works the same. To keep the effect going, it demands ever greater stimulation. That is not because you are an alcoholic or weaker than others, but because habituation takes place in this way. Our subconscious registers the chemical effect of alcohol over time. The big question is whether we want to expose our bodies and minds to this? Aren't we much happier without that constant struggle?

Alcohol Abuse and the Bible

The Bible warns against the dangers of alcohol. We saw it before in Lemuel (Proverbs 31) but it actually starts of at the very beginning, in Genesis. Noah, and later Lot, are posed as cautionary examples. Wine caused them to do shameful things; with disastrous consequences for their family life and posterity. The wine mocks people and takes inhibitions away. It lowers the barrier against saying or doing things you will regret later and often can't even remember. With nasty consequences for friendships and relationships.

Indeed, booze can also literary ruin lives and things. Hooligans and rioters often act "under influence". As a pastor, I remember a pastoral conversation with a lady who had lost her daughter because of the reckless driving of a drunken motorist. A beautiful girl who read her Bible was gone because of someone who in Biblical times deserved the death penalty for the ruined lives he left behind. The wine is a mocker (Prov 20:1), a symbol of how foolish people can act. In the Prophets and in Revelation, wine is often an image of God's wrath, the Hangover of God's judgement of the foolish behaviour of people.

According to the New Testament, it is good not to drink wine (Rom 14:21), especially if we bring other Christians into temptation or give offense to them. Congregations are not allowed to choose bishops, priests or deacons who drink a lot of wine (1 Tim3, Titus 1). Why not? Because their office requires spiritual discernment and has an exemplary function. Polygamy is easily avoided by most of us, but drink is everywhere, including at Christian birthday parties and conferences. It is also important to realise that in antiquity wine used to be mixed with water, like a lemonade syrup, so apart from missing most of the modern additives, it was probably less harmful than our modern commercial drinks. From the Septuagint it is clear that the Greek word for wine can also

mean unfermented grape juice. Josephus confirms that in his Jewish antiquities (2.5.2) where an attendant is squeezing grapes on the spot. The fresh fruit-juice that flows from this into the cup is called "wine" by Josephus. So, wine does not need to be fermented or alcoholic to be wine, but it is clear that the warnings in Scripture go out against wine with alcohol.

Not all fermented wine is alcoholic. Other fermentations are also possible, which are healthy for the body and contain virtually no alcohol, such as *Kombucha*. I am a home brewer of this beverage that is these days now also found grocery stores. I use raisins for the second fermentation on the bottle, so technically I produce this drink by fermenting dried grapes. This is also wine in the biblical understanding. However, the warnings of scripture are directed against "strong drink" or spirits.

I don't want to judge your drinking or to how many glasses you should restrict yourself. Modern research that was not sponsored by the liquor industry (remember how the smoking industry used to invest in medical research and healthy image?) suggests that there is no safe level of alcohol consumption as to heightening risk for nasty diseases. Granted, this risk may be negligible for some and greater for women in general, but it still suggests that alcohol as found in our bottle stores today is not doing you any favours, even in moderate amounts.

How many?

How far can you go? The Bible places the boundary in two places: responsibility for the neighbour and for your own body as temple of the Holy Spirit. Do not become drunk with wine, but seek fulfilment with God's Spirit (Eph. 5:18). If you are no longer in control of your own tongue or actions when you drink alcohol, you have gone too far. Then it is time to critically examine your relationship with alcohol. Consider whether it really makes a positive contribution to your life.

Scripture also establishes a link between alcohol and hypocrisy. In society, we often see people drinking to push inner conflicts and sinful behaviour outside their consciousness. They want to forget what they did in business or politics. This can also happen in Christian companies or churches. U.K. English has the expression "whisky priest" for pastors who have fled to drinking out of disillusionment with the unchristian way their church or personal life is functioning. They have to give people the 'spiritual goods' on order. Yesterday the minister had to be against homosexuality and de facto relations, today the church wants him to bless these, etc. Society asks and ministers have to produce and excuse what the Scriptures condemn. It is a dreadful, but ancient business. In Micha's time, there were already prophets who made a living by telling the religious crowds exactly what they wanted to hear, while they were possibly themselves looking forward to the next bottle as a reward: the only pleasure in life that seemed to remain. " If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,' that would be just the prophet for this people! " (Micha 2:11, NIV)

How to proceed?

If alcohol has gained a too important a place in your life, there is no reason to become desperate or to just continue plodding on with life. Take courage, there are tens of thousands of (normal) people like you. A first important step is to honestly face what drink does. This article contributes to this.

Additionally, there are good cognitive methods that can help you weigh if drink has still something to contribute to your life. Also in this respect, the Biblical saying applies that the truth shall set you free. (John 8:32) Willpower and good intentions are not going to help you enough long-term. Their energy runs out and then eventually you are facing the same problem over again in a few weeks' time. I would like to recommend the cognitive method of Annie Grace. At her website: <https://www.alcoholexperiment.com/> you can follow a free course that teaches you

about the effects of alcohol, helping you also to live alcohol free for thirty days. It takes about half an hour to an hour per day. This is guaranteed to help you regain control over your life. Only then will you have real freedom of choice to decide whether you want to drink as you used to, moderate or perhaps stop altogether. In the latter case, do not worry that the Holy supper cause you to lapse. From my days as chaplain in a South African rehabilitation Clinique I recall that the small amount of wine (if you are receiving both elements or celebrating the Eucharist yourself) is no problem at all. That is sacred use and the only truly liberating, strong drink that sinners can and should enjoy in this life.