My first significant interaction with the issue of alcohol and a Biblical perspective towards drinking alcohol and wine came when I was interviewing with another church prior to coming to Grace Bible Church. One of the elders in particular advocated total abstinence as a requirement for all believers. While abstinence was and is my personal choice, it was not and is not something I could advocate as a Scriptural requirement. As I tried to understand the elder’s position, it was revealed that he believed that Jesus, at the wedding in Cana, turned the water not into wine, but into grape juice. I realized then that this was no small issue!

What about the miracle? What did Jesus make in Cana? A simple concordance study will demonstrate that the Greek word used in John 2:3, 9-10 (oinos) could not refer to a simple juice, but that it must have alcoholic content (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:3, 8 make no sense if oinos is not some form of alcoholic beverage).

But this may raise even more questions for the follower of Christ. if Jesus made wine to be drunk and enjoyed, what factors should influence the decisions we make about our consumption of wine and alcoholic beverages?

A number of principles should guide our decisions. While this is not an exhaustive discussion, at minimum, these four factors must be understood and applied.

1. **Biblical wine was different than contemporary wine.**

What we know as alcohol (distilled liquor) was unknown in Biblical times. There are some references, particularly in the Old Testament, to “strong drink” (e.g., Lev. 10:9; Jg. 13:4ff; 1 Sam. 1:14-15; Prov. 20:1; 31:4, 6; Is. 5:11), but these always refer to a strong beverage made from a fermented grain or fruit. [Richards, p. 238.]

Additionally, while wine may have been drunk in Biblical times, in general, wine was watered down (particularly in New Testament times). Wine was typically diluted with at least two parts water, and most often with three to four parts water to one part wine. A strong wine was one that was mixed with a one to one ratio, and those who drank it unmixed were considered as barbarians. [Geisler, p. 50.]

In fact, in many ancient cultures, drinking supplies were not often safe, so wine was added to the water as a purifying agent. So while it was still considered wine, it was essentially flavored water. In fact, one writer has noted that drinking such diluted wine would have required a person in New Testament times to drink 22 glasses of wine to get the same alcoholic content as two modern martinis! [Geisler, quoting Stein, p. 51.]

Biblical wine and drinks were far different than what is drunk today indeed!
2. Drinking may be permitted, but drunkenness is always sin.

There are Biblical examples of drinking, including the miracle of Jesus at Cana. In addition, Timothy was encouraged to drink some wine for its medicinal purposes (1 Tim. 5:23), and the qualification for elders was that they not be addicted to wine, not that they abstain totally (1 Tim 3:3, 8). The Old Testament also acknowledged the possibility of drinking wine — it was even drunk at Jewish feasts (Dt. 14:23, 26; 16:13), given as sacrifices to the Lord (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5ff; 18:12) and was sometimes used as a picture of celebration (Ps. 104:15; Prov. 3;10; Song 5:1; Joel 2:19ff; 3:18).

However, this must be qualified with two more observations:

- Drunkenness is always called sin in Scripture; and those who are perpetually drunk are among those whose lives demonstrate that they are not believers and followers of Christ (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:10; 11:21; Gal. 5:21).
- Moreover, while drinking wine is not disallowed in Scripture, there are multiple strong warnings about drinking too much wine, for it causes impairment of judgment and often precipitates foolish choices and foolish living (Gen. 9:21ff; 19:32ff; Prov. 20:1; 21:17; 23:20-21; 23:29-35; 31:4-5; Hos. 4:11). The prophets especially picture the dangers of drinking (look up the word “wine” in your concordance for many such illustrations).

So, while there are multiple places in Scripture that allow for moderate drinking, it generally is also accompanied by strong warnings: drunkenness is always wrong and too much drinking will generally lead to destructive living.

3. It is always gracious and wise to give up liberties to prevent the sin of others.

No decision is ever made in a vacuum. Every choice we make and every action in which we participate will impact the lives of others around us. And the Biblical mandate is that the choices we make should stimulate others to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24), and what is most important is not our own personal desires and interests, but the interests of others (Phil. 2:4).

So, while the believer in Christ has the liberty to drink (as long as it is God-honoring and glorifying and does not lead to sin, 1 Cor. 10:31), he does not have the liberty to drink if in taking that liberty he encourages someone else to drink who has become convinced in his own mind that to drink would be sin.

Romans 14 speaks directly to this very issue, and among the concluding comments is this statement: “It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles” (v. 21).

Now “stumbles” does not mean, “doesn’t like.” This passage does not mean that if one believer makes a choice to abstain and another makes a choice to drink moderately to glorify
God, the abstaining brother cannot say, “I think you’re wrong, you need to stop and be a tea-totaller like me.”

But “stumble” does mean that one believer may make a decision to abstain because he either has become convinced in his own mind that drinking for him is sin — perhaps because he cannot drink in a God-glorifying way, or perhaps because he recognizes that he cannot drink without drinking too much. Meanwhile, another believer may recognize his liberty, and choose to drink; the abstaining brother sees the drinking brother and thinks, “He is a faithful follower of Christ, and he is drinking, so while I still don’t think it’s right for me, maybe I should.” And in doing so, he violates his own conscience, and even worse, may become drunk or perpetually drunk, and he sins against God. In this case, the believer who has exercised his liberty has provoked and tempted his Christian abstaining brother to sin. And thus the “liberated” believer also sins in the process.

It is far better to remember the other words in Rom. 14 — “the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit….So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (vv. 17, 19). It is not important to be able to engage in legitimate liberties; it is important to build up and stimulate other believers to godly living. The choices we make should reflect that commitment.

4. Beware of legalism and pride if you abstain from wine.

Just as the one who exercises liberty in drinking must be aware of potential problems in exercising his liberty, so the one who abstains must be aware of another potential pitfall.

It is possible to come to believe that abstinence is what produces spiritual life instead of understanding that abstinence is the overflow of spiritual life. This is the warning to the Colossians in 2:20-23. Some believers, even out of a genuine desire to serve and follow Christ, will reduce the spiritual life to a set of core values consisting of a variety of “dos” and “don’ts” that they believe reflect genuine faith. That kind of spiritual faith is closely allied to pharisaical hypocrisy and not only is likely to produce a false sense of spiritual pride, it ultimately provides no value in keeping one from indulging in fleshly sin (Col. 2:23)! Moreover, it denies the truth that everything created by God is good when received with godly gratitude and appropriated in Biblical ways (1 Tim. 4:4-5).

So, should the believer in Christ drink wine? It is possible to drink in a God-glorifying way, but it also is not commanded and it is possible for a believer to drink in a way that produces sin for himself and others. Whether one drinks or abstains it is possible he can defend his position Biblically. Whatever the choice, each person must be convinced in his own mind about that choice (Rom. 14:5), and drink or abstain in such a way that God is glorified, his brothers in Christ are built up spiritually, and his reputation with unbelievers remains good (1 Pt. 2:9).
For Further Reading (this list is by no means exhaustive!):


   Laney has a brief, but very helpful overview of the pertinent issues related to this subject on pp. 65-67.


