

Common Arguments Defending Alcohol, Answered

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Reading Time: 11 minutes

Remarkably, alcohol is the only drug one must defend *not* using. The statement, “I don’t drink,” feels like it is more likely to draw a condescending eye-roll with most people than it is a pat on the back.

Personally, the more I study this issue, the clearer it becomes. Some of the following pro-alcohol arguments at one time stumped me, but after study, I see them more clearly. Perhaps you have heard most of these too, and—like me—have struggled to find the truth.

Yet, before we go further, understand this: Many people simply *want* to drink. They seek *validation* on this issue. They desire to drink a bottle of wine or a couple of glasses of beer while simultaneously being able to claim some form of Christianity. They’ve already made up their mind about this, and no amount of reason will convince them they are wrong. Only a dose of honesty can do that.

This article is for those who know the Bible commands sober-mindedness, which is the foundational principle for this subject. They know drinking is wrong, but—in their honesty—struggle to rightly respond to some of these arguments. Maybe this will help. Consider a few of them:

“Jesus turned water into wine, so Jesus must approve of the consumption of alcohol.”

John 2 records the first of Jesus’ signs which point to His identity as the Son of God. In this miracle we see other lessons about the abundant blessings of God, how Jesus saves the best for last, etc. **For that reason, it is a shame that so many have hijacked this beautiful story to teach something Jesus didn’t teach.** Shame on anyone who does that. This passage was never intended to be a proof-text for alcohol consumption. To take “Jesus encouraged drunkenness” out of this text **is a gross example of *eisegesis***—reading *into* the text what you want to find.

John was not written in 21st-century English. It was written in 1st-century Koine Greek. There was no word for the chemical compound known as alcohol (ethanol), as it wasn’t discovered until the 10th century. *Oinos* (the word translated as “wine” in John 2) is a generic word that simply means juice (or must) of the grape. Both strong alcoholic wine and fresh grape juice—and everything in between—had the same Greek word: *oinos*. Thus, *oinos*—along with any other Bible word translated “wine”—needs to be understood in its proper context. If the *context* insinuates high alcohol content, then we should note that. Conversely, we also should if the context does not necessarily imply a particularly intoxicating *oinos*.

There is nothing in John 2:3-11 that suggests the wine Jesus made was intentionally alcoholic (actually, much to the contrary). You see, *oinos* was a staple of ancient times, and even served as a natural purifying agent for bacteria in the water (cf. 1 Tim. 5:23). Furthermore, even *oinos* that was specifically prepared to be intoxicating didn’t have the alcoholic content of modern alcoholic beverages.

Here’s a critical point that is often missed: the Jews would often mix the *oinos* with water, ranging from 3-parts water/1-part *oinos*, to as much as 10- or 20-parts water. **In other words, whether or not there was some alcohol in the *oinos* is beside the point. Remember, alcohol is not bad in and of itself.** If alcohol itself were bad, we’d have to throw away our vanilla or almond extract (which can contain anywhere between 50-90% pure alcohol! Whew!). Soy sauce can have 2% pure alcohol. Many common foods contain traces of alcohol. (Note, here we find the major flaw with the “one drop drunk” argument.) What is so bad is intoxication—**and any degree of intoxication is what should be**

avoided. Alcohol becomes evil when used to intoxicate or dull the mind, which any modern wine, beer, or spirit can achieve very quickly (even just one glass).

(Intoxication on average for most body types occurs when you consume more than 15ml of alcohol (half an ounce) over the course of an hour. It's at that point when the liver is unable to metabolize the alcohol in the bloodstream.)

It would have been very difficult (if not impossible) to become intoxicated from the regular table *oinos* of Jesus's day. Even children drank that stuff. Knowing how table *oinos* was prepared in ancient times, it didn't come close to surpassing the average person's ability to metabolize what little alcohol may have been present. Whether there was *some* alcohol in the wine Jesus created (however unlikely) is a non-issue.

Here is the main issue: Would the same God (in the flesh) who spoke, "Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly" (Prov. 23:31) turn around and produce wine with substantial alcohol content for a crowd of people who had already "drunk freely" (John 2:10) of actual wine? It seems contradictory to the nature of God, who tempts no one (James 1:13).

"There are lots of passages that speak about 'moderate drinking' in a positive way."

One well-known writer in the church observed, "There are some passages that speak approvingly about a moderate use of alcoholic beverages." He starts his list with Deuteronomy 14:26, followed by some other passages, including Numbers 28:7, Psalm 104:14-15, and Proverbs 9:1-6. There are other passages he and others cite, but these are the most persuasive passages used by proponents of social drinking (the others are even more easily dismissed). So let's look at them.

Deuteronomy 14:26. One preacher recently wrote that this passage "clearly places a drink with alcoholic content in the context of blessing—something that an Israelite could spend money on." But is this really so clear? Contextually, Israelites who lived far away from Jerusalem would find it impractical to bring a 10th of their yearly capital (livestock, harvested produce, etc.) to the temple (Deut. 14:22-24). They could convert their annual yield to money and purchase in Jerusalem what they otherwise couldn't transport (v. 25). Instead of bringing *tirosh* (fresh "wine") and *yitshar* ("oil") per verse 23, upon arrival they could buy *yayin* ("wine," the juice of *tirosh*) or *shakar* (the juice of other fruits) or anything else their "appetite craved" (v. 26).

First, nothing is said about the intoxicating quality of these liquids—and, if capable of producing intoxication, whether or not they would be diluted with water according to custom. Bible “wine” is not always the same “wine” available today. Further, we are guilty of reading the text through western, 21st-century glasses when we assume “strong drink” is always a euphemism for alcohol. It could have just as easily referred to a drink that was particularly sweet or pungent with spices. Second, just as this passage doesn’t explicitly forbid the purchase of alcohol, it also doesn’t explicitly forbid the purchase of drinks that are impure or drugged. What is wrong with just assuming God is authorizing the purchase of liquids in their most pure and natural state? After all, God only commands what is good, so long as His other laws do not prohibit it.

Third, if God is permitting the purchase of intoxicating drink in Deuteronomy 14:26, what does this change? We are still commanded to be sober-minded. God also at one time permitted (without approval) polygamy, divorce, slavery, etc. Why? God only temporarily “permitted” (Matt. 19:7-8, ESV) or “suffered” (KJV) these things without approving them. And throughout Scripture, God gave enough warnings about intoxication, polygamy, divorce, and slavery that the faithful would be wise enough to heed. If the Old Testament is our standard for what God desires, we have settled for the “letter of death” (cf. 2 Cor. 3:6-11).



Numbers 28:7. This verse includes regulations about the “drink offering” for the Lord. We only again note that *shakar* (“strong drink”) is a broad term that can also refer to any particularly sweet or pungent drink, and is not universally an alcoholic term. One man, who assumes “strong drink” is in reference to alcohol, writes, “If this ‘strong drink’ had been inherently and totally evil would God have allowed it to be used in His worship? Surely not.”

His logic is not fool-proof. Even if this is specifically a beverage containing alcohol, there is nothing “inherently and totally evil” about alcohol. God made the chemical known as alcohol. Alcohol as a substance is sinful when used as an *intoxicant*. (Also, barring the discussion about Christian influence.)

Psalms 104:14-15. Here the psalmist is praising the Creator for how He provides for the wants of His creatures. God feeds the livestock with the grass and feeds man with many kinds of natural products, the fruits of which can be made into “wine,” “oil,” and “bread.” Again, Old Testament “wine” (*yayin*) isn’t identical to modern wine, and here is a broad term meaning “fruit from the vine.” Contextually, the psalmist is praising God for man’s nutritious *sustenance*. There’s nothing in the text that suggests God is commending the use of something that intoxicates the mind.

Proverbs 9:1-6. It was an ancient practice to mix wine with spices and herbs—the goal of which was not to inebriate but to enhance the taste.

Ecclesiastes 9:7. Once again, “wine” is a generic word and context should always determine the usage is specifically *alcoholic*. Here, when God approves of our works, we can enjoy God’s provisions with a joyful and merry heart—whether the product is from the field or the vineyard. It is presupposed that the produce here is good—and corn that has mildewed, and wine (*yayin*) that has changed into a state that it is now a “mocker” (Prov. 22:1) is no longer good. Additionally, a “merry heart” doesn’t insinuate that the wine was alcoholic, just as “joy” doesn’t suggest that the bread in this passage was alcoholic.

“Elders are to ‘not be given to wine,’ while deacons are to ‘not be given to *much* wine.’ Therefore, alcohol is okay.”

The difference between elders “not to be given to wine” (1 Tim. 3:3; “not a drunkard,” ESV) and deacons “not be given to *much* wine” (1 Tim. 3:8; “not addicted to much wine,” ESV) doesn’t have much intrinsic difference in the original. **First, both texts are commanding these men not to be under the influence of these things.** Culturally, excessive drinking—even with non-intoxicating drink—was a vice typical of the *gluttonous* parties in the days of Paul. Prizes were given to those who could imbibe and retain the most (again, not necessarily with the goal of inebriation). This could have easily been a problem among some men in the early church, as this was a notorious practice (these people in 1 Cor 6:10, called by Paul *methusoi*, or “toppers,” and “such were some of you,” v. 11). So, Paul is focusing on a common vice and is not exclusively referring to the consumption of specifically

intoxicating beverages.

Second, anyone who argues that Paul is approving of the moderate use of beer/wine/spirits of any kind—so long as it is not too “much”—is adopting a *dangerous* and *inconsistent* method of interpretation. **It is dangerous because it assumes what is not explicitly forbidden must be approved.** (The command, “Let not the sun go down on your wrath,” becomes permission to be ugly & bitter anytime between sunrise and sunset.). When Paul says, “not greedy for money” (verse 3) or “not greedy for dishonest gain” (verse 8), Paul is not saying it’s okay to be a *moderately* materialistic, so long as it is short of “greed” or “dishonesty.” Put in modern terms, in no way could Paul be forbidding a deacon to *frequent* the local bar while permitting him to go *occasionally* so long as he doesn’t drink “too much.” Furthermore, it is impossible to think Paul was approving the “moderate” use of all kinds of wine then available and used. Many wines were drugged, while other wines were disapproved by even the heathen if not adequately diluted with water.

Third, since intoxicating beverages are so dangerous, why didn’t Paul just say, “Elders & deacons shouldn’t drink ANY *oinos*”? Because *oinos* is a general word, encompassing the total variety of drinks made from the juice of the grape—many of which were not particularly intoxicating in volume, others so diluted with water that they were practically impossible to inebriate. Thus, a blanket command to totally abstain from all *oinos* would totally ignore the known distinction of that day. Another reason why he didn’t flatly condemn all *oinos* (aside from the fact that there was no word precisely for the intoxicating variety) was that honest Christians would naturally come to see that intoxicating drink was inconsistent with Christianity. Once again: slave-holding, polygamy, gambling, bribery—none of these are expressly forbidden in Scripture (along with many other objectionable ancient cultural practices). But when Christians see the first principles of love, honesty, work-ethic, and sober-mindedness, we see how these things are wrong.

“The Bible doesn’t condemn alcohol, only drunkenness.”

People like making this observation because they assume people today can’t scientifically know when drunkenness occurs. “I’ve just had a glass or two of beer. Who’s to say I’m drunk? I don’t *feel* drunk.”

We need to remember that alcohol as a beverage is wrong when the volume of alcohol consumed exceeds your body’s ability to metabolize the poison. As we observed in a previous [article](#), those few drops of highly-alcoholic vanilla extract in your cookie dough aren’t sinful to eat. Alcohol isn’t wrong—it’s the *intoxication* that’s wrong. You’ll never

become intoxicated from cookie dough. But when you consume just one or two 12oz glasses of beer or wine, virtually anyone would become intoxicated (even if he/she doesn't *feel* impaired). While this intoxication threshold varies (depending on age, gender, genetics, weight, and amount of food already in the stomach), it doesn't vary as much as one thinks and the average man becomes intoxicated when he consumes more than half an ounce of pure alcohol within one hour.

Also—and this needs very little explanation—you are **wrecking** your reputation when others know you drink and don't have a problem with others drinking. Remember, it isn't your name you wear now, it is the name of Christ. But this requires a different article.

“Aren't you failing to condemn gluttony?”

This is an argument designed to change the subject, as gluttony and intoxication are two different issues. ([See an article about gluttony here.](#)) Gluttony, as we use it today, refers to being under the control of food. Of course, Christians must take care not to be captive to anything but Christ (1 Cor. 6:12). I believe it is essential to preach against a lack of self-control. Self-control is vital to faithful Christian living. I take great pains to live a self-controlled life (yet sometimes fail).

Gluttony, biblically speaking, is riotous living. Scripturally defined, gluttony is specifically living for the gratification of the belly (flesh) and is the opposite of living for Christ. It should be pointed out that many who engage in this practice are often *skinny*. **Body weight or volume of food consumed is not the criteria that determines who is a glutton.** One's attitudes toward God and the flesh is what determines this.

Going back to our subject, **lack of self-control & intoxication, though related, are not the same thing.** No one has “one too many” slices of pizza and comes home and beats his wife. No one has “one too many” donuts and kills someone in a head-on collision. No one has “one too many” twinkies and goes and commits fornication. Gluttony & the command to be sober-minded are two different issues.



“Jesus drank wine in Luke 7:33-34.”

No, He didn’t—at least not any wine, or *oinos*, that had any substantial amount of alcohol content. This is a very weak text on which to build a theology of “moderate drinking.” Here, Jesus is only repeating an accusation against Him (cf. Matthew 11:18-19):

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.” (ESV)

The point Jesus is making is that the rumors being spread about Him by the Jewish elite **were not true**. He was *not* a glutton; He was *not* a drunkard. Just as they accused John of being demon-possessed due to his severely austere lifestyle, they accused Jesus of being a sinner simply because He accepted invitations to banquets with those less-than-scrupulous about the law (cf. Matt. 11:9-13).

“To say that we should avoid anything that diminishes your sober-mindedness seems like a slippery-slope

argument. Does this mean we can't take medication that affects the mind?"

The Bible commands sober-mindedness (Rom 12:1-3; Gal. 5:21; 1 Thess. 5:6; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; 2:2-6, 11-13; 1 Pet. 1:13; 4:7; 5:8, etc.). Thus, it logically follows that we should be wary of anything that will lessen our sober-mindedness. That is not just logical—it's a straightforward interpretation of the text. We must simply keep this in balance with the rest of Biblical teaching.

The Bible seems to make an exception for medicine when it has the unfortunate side-effect of intoxication or loopiness (cf. 1 Tim. 5:23, Prov. 31:6, etc.). Perhaps in part because intoxication is not the goal, but an unfortunate side-effect that we don't desire. People shouldn't take medicine to numb the mind—they should take medication to improve their *health*. That's one reason why the *abuse* of prescription drugs is so bad. Medicine should be taken in a controlled way.

Yet, the Spirit's emphasis on sober-mindedness should at least give us pause before taking any potentially mind-altering medicines. If you're like me, you hate taking medication that makes you drowsy or irrational. I only do it when I have exhausted all other options.

It is important to note that sometimes depressants and other doctor-prescribed medicines **improve** sober-mindedness. There are times when ailments & chemical imbalances of the brain due to diseases rob people of a lucid and sound mind. So, any medication that helps restore mental balance—even if just a little—is part of our obedience to the Biblical mandate of sober-mindedness. There are some people who—without the aid of medicine—are not of sound mind.

As a substance, alcohol isn't bad. The danger of alcohol is what it can do to the mind when the quantity exceeds your body's ability to oxidize it (which, medically, happens a lot sooner than most think). Why would we do this *recreationally*? The same holds for any kind of medication. We are all obligated to simply do our best to maintain a sober and sound mind.

Conclusion

Much more can be said about this, but this article is already too long. We must remember the reason drunkenness is so bad: it is the opposite of sober-mindedness. Medically speaking, intoxication occurs very quickly, before one "feels" intoxicated. But once you cross that line, little by little your ability to make moral decisions and sound judgments is

impaired.