

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

time? Some object to the idea that Jesus drank wine. What does this passage say regarding Jesus' personal practice, if anything? State what you know of Jewish customs of that period that might help answer this question.

SPECIAL STUDY: SHOULD JESUS DRINK WINE?

Without hesitation many Christians respond in the negative without examining the reasons for their conclusion. If pushed for a reason, they might reply, "The Bible forbids its use." To this a skeptic might raise the challenge: "Always? Unconditionally?" At this point the teetotaler might object, "But Jesus is my example, and I KNOW that He would not drink. For me, His example is conclusive."

But is the presupposition on which this conclusion is drawn a correct one? That is, is it true that "Jesus would not drink"? Instead of supposing what a person might or might not have done, is it not better to ask the person himself, to learn what his practice really was? Why not ask Jesus, "Lord, what is your personal practice regarding wine? How does your practice compare with that of your contemporaries, or how does it differ?"

To this, Jesus made reply: "John the Baptist came eating no bread and drinking no wine; and you say, 'He has an evil spirit.' The Son of man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look! A greedy fellow and a drinker, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners.' Yet wisdom is proved right by all her children." (Luke 7:33-35)

The life-style of Jesus revealed in this text is probably quite different from that expected of Him by ascetics of every age. Yet what this text actually says proves that their desire to use the Son of man as a champion for the cause of total abstinence on the question of alcohol is based on other considerations and not on the example of Jesus. Note the importance of this text as it relates to this question:

1. *Jesus affirmed that He normally and habitually drank wine.*

This is not a conclusion drawn by scholars or the consensus of critics, but the unabashed statement of the Lord Himself as He comments on His own way of life. The question at issue in this context is the immediate contrast between the fundamental wisdom behind the way of life practiced by John the Baptist and Jesus, and the fundamental folly of

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those who perversely refused to accept the life, message, ministry and mission of either. However, it is worthy of note that Jesus did not change His life-style merely because it laid Him open to the criticism of being a "glutton and a wine-bibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.

2. Jesus affirmed that He habitually drank wine *and said so in a context where His meaning is clear, His practice being sharply contrasted with that of the abstainers on the one hand, and that of the drunkards on the other.*
 - a. Jesus was not an abstainer, as evidenced by the contrast with the life-long habits of John the Baptist whose well-known asceticism was common knowledge and the basis for the baseless criticism of him by fickle people.
 - b. Jesus was no drunkard or glutton, since He Himself borrows these slanders from the mouth of His detractors, not from those who objectively try to describe His real manner of life. His matchless life and sinless character unmask these vilifications for what they are.
 - c. Therefore, Jesus' practice, by His own statement, clarified by His stated antitheses, stands exactly halfway between both extremes. His is neither the teetotaler's abstinence nor the drunkard's excess, but the moderate's evenness of balance in all things.
3. Jesus affirmed that He habitually drank wine, *saying so to a people accustomed to think of wine as a blessing.*
 - a. That the Jews knew wine and other strong drink to be a dangerous curse, goes without saying, as many texts testify. (Cf. Prov. 20:1; 21:17; 23:10, 21; 23:29-35, etc.)
 - b. But the Jews knew wine to be the generous blessing from the Lord. (Gen. 27:28; Psa. 104:15; Isa. 55:1; Hos. 2:8, 9, 22; Joel 2:19-24; Amos 9:13, 14)
 - (1) They spoke of bread and wine as the staple articles of diet. (Gen. 27:25, 37; Dt. 11:14; Num. 6:20; Judg. 19:19-21; 2 Sam. 16:1, 2; 2 Chron. 11:11, etc.)
 - (2) Consequently, they were required to put wine on the grocery list of provisions for the priesthood (Num. 18:12; Dt. 18:4; 1 Chron. 9:29, etc.)
 - (3) Wine appeared as a normal expression of ordinary hospitality. (Gen. 14:18; Judg. 19:19-21; 1 Sam. 16:20; 25:18; 1 Chron. 12:40; Jn. 2:3-10)

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- (4) Wine was commanded as a drink offering to God (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 23:13; Num. 15:5, 7, 10), probably because it was in common use and therefore had practical value to the Jews. This made it a proper thing that could be offered in sacrifice to God.
 - (5) Wine was consumed by the Israelites even at their religious festivals. (Dt. 14:22-26; 12:17, 18; Isa. 62:8, 9)
 - (6) The Jews knew of its value as an anesthetic (Prov. 31:6, 7; Lk. 10:34) as well as its necessity in case of bad water or stomach infermities (1 Tim 5:23)
- c. So, for Jesus to confess to eating bread and drinking wine to a Jewish audience, is no more than to confess to living a quite normal life. As an accurate reading of the circumstances in this text (Luke 7:33-35 and Mt. 11:18, 19) will show, it was this very normalness about Jesus' conduct that drew fire from the cynics. In collision with the popular view as to what a "holy man" should be, Jesus wore no hair shirt, fasted so secretly that no one ever knew about it (if He ever did), ate common food, drank common drink and made no extraordinary effort to let His real holiness appear in a superficial manner. But His real character was so well attested, that He did not need to dignify the accusation of being a "winebibber and a glutton" by even bothering to answer it. The facts people knew about His life spoke for themselves.

So, the real question is not "Should Jesus drink wine?" as our tongue-in-cheek title would have it, for, as a matter of fact, He did. But this is not the point to be discussed with the modern Christian, disturbed by the excess in certain areas surrounding the use of wine or other forms of alcohol. The question is really "Should a Christian follow his Lord's example in drinking wine today?"

Although the apostolic doctrine is replete with stern denunciations of "drunkenness wherein is riot and excess," yet the Apostles do not enjoin unconditional and perpetual abstinence as the way around over-indulgence. Theirs too is the route of habitual moderation in all things (1 Co. 9:25), since they are suspicious of any doctrine that promotes rigor of devotion, self-abasement and severity to the body through negative regulations that God did not give. Such

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prohibitions might have an appearance of wisdom, but are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh. (Col. 2:16-23)

Beyond his disparaging of drunkenness and other forms of excess connected with the attitudes and activities under the influence of alcohol, the Apostle Paul, for instance, can find no rational basis for abstaining either from meat or wine in normal practice, since he knows that all God's gifts (the context is food) are to be received with thanksgiving. (1 Tim. 4:1-5) However, under special circumstances Paul could conceivably dispense with ANY given food, for instance, if it caused a brother to stumble. (Ro. 14:21) But contextually, it is obvious that the Apostle viewed this abstinence only as necessary in reference to the weaker Christian who had some scruple against that particular food. (See Ro. 14:1—15:7; 1 Co. 6:12-20; 8 all; 10:23-33) This is a necessary conclusion, since Paul could delineate no objective or absolute principle whereby wine or any food should be proscribed under any and all circumstances.

Further, in seeking qualified personnel for the highest tasks in the Church, the Apostle demanded that no excessive drinkers be tolerated in the eldership or in the diaconate. (1 Tim. 3:3, 8; Tit. 1:7) In giving directions for producing Christlike piety in the Church, he only urges Titus (2:3) to bid older women not to be slaves to drink. However, in neither case does he suggest abstinence as a necessary quality. Rather, when he felt called upon to give his advice to a young abstainer, Paul counselled Timothy specifically in favor of wine, as opposed to water. (1 Tim. 5:23)

"Should Jesus Drink Wine?" may be an amusing question, but it will stand for serious reflection. Jesus was a Jew living in first-century Palestine. Out of proper moral consideration for the needs and views of His people, He ate and drank the food common to His people. It is a fair question whether He would follow His first-century practice while living, say, among twentieth-century Americans, whose history and attitudes toward alcohol may well be quite different than that of first-century Jews. But here it may be objected that twentieth-century Americans may need instruction by the Son of God, so that their (mistaken?) conscience be edified, i.e. formed along entirely different lines.

"WHEN IN ROME, DO AS THE ROMANS"?

Lest some, caught up in the confusing currents of a relativistic

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age and maddened by the spineless morality of situation ethics, mistake this position taken here to be the same drivel, let it be vigorously denied that situation ethics has anything to do with Christianity.

The assertions made earlier that Jesus did in fact drink wine in His own situation in the first century, primarily because He chose to conform His practice with that of His own people, the Jews, cannot be construed in any fashion to justify the character-rotting influence of that immorality passing under the current name of "situation ethics." "Situation ethics," as I understand the phrase in its popular use, refers to a life guided by NO ABSOLUTE moral principle. There is no absolute morality, that is, except for the pervasive rule of thumb that each situation must be dealt with as a separate entity without any necessary reference to any other situation. According to its various practitioners, each moral decision must be made without reference to the (im)moral standard of reference of the individuals involved, be it hedonism, opportunism or whatever.

There is a chasmic contrast between this view of ethical decisions and that practiced by Jesus of Nazareth and expected of His disciples. Whereas "situation ethics" has no fixed code of absolutes within the sphere of which ethical judgments are made, Christ's doctrine proclaims a rigid standard of inflexible righteousness. This standard outlines clearly what is meant by drunkenness, fornication, theft, lying, etc. By forbidding these and commanding their ethical opposites, i.e. temperance, purity, integrity, etc., Jesus unveiled a code of absolutes as demanding as the very character of God Himself! (See "Jesus' Purpose For Preaching This Sermon", notes on the Sermon on the Mount, Vol. I, 188ff.) What is NOT spelled out in regard to these standards is how they are to be applied in every case. To a certain degree every situation faced by Jesus' disciple will be different from every other. So, instead of writing new rules of conduct for each new situation, Jesus placed into the hands of His disciple a few simple directives by which he may decide how to act ethically in each situation. (There directives may be gleaned from great blocks of Scripture on this subject, such as Ro. 14:1—15:7; 1 Cor. 6:12-20; chap. 8; 10:23-33; 16:14; 1 Jn. 3, etc.)

Thus it is that the Christ and His disciples are armed, not with some self-seeking, self-serving philosophy, but girded with the revelations of the living God in an enlightened conscience, face each situation and decide what each must do (1) to please the Father, and (2) to serve his fellow man best in that situation, and (3) what will achieve his own highest goal.

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Now to return: should Jesus (or His disciple) drink wine? But to ask this question is to see another: what other moral considerations were weighed into His decision which brought Him to act as He did in that given situation? If we fail to see these, we should badly interpret why He pursued that course, and, as a natural consequence, we would misapply His example in our own period.

He drank wine in an age that knew no automobiles racing along a narrow ribbon of concrete within a cubit of oncoming traffic. He drank wine in a society not yet pressed for time, where the need for ready reflexes to operate fast-moving machinery was small. He lived in an age that moved in terms of the sun, not the timeclock. His was an era of walkers, not riders, to whom sedentary living was less a problem. But He also lived in an age as profligate as any other, an age that sought its amusements in the arms of Bacchus, an age when many a party devolved into revelry. Even so, Jesus could trace a clear line of godly conduct between asceticism and excess. In our own highly industrialized machine age, common sense considerations of safety may cause the Lord to counsel against alcohol in any situation where consideration for others and one's own safety is compromised by slower reflexes.

In light of Jesus' practice, another interesting, if unsolvable, puzzle is the question why the Lord did not concern Himself greatly with the long-term effect of alcohol on the brain about which modern research has so much to say. Is it possible that Jesus' answer to this query might be: "Do not drink to excess, and you need not fear the adverse effects of alcohol on your brain"? After all, is not His practice somewhat indicative of the conclusion that a moderate use of alcohol by a God-oriented man need not fear long-range negative effects on any part of his body, presuming that this man eats, sleeps and exercises normally? Or to state the problem differently, would not Jesus, Revealer of God and Creator of man, surely have revealed something of the lethal danger of drinking what is held to be a poison? Is it too much to argue that His silence on the subject and His personal practice, taken together, argue that our body chemistry can absorb and profitably use a certain amount of alcohol?

IS ALCOHOLISM A SICKNESS?

Another ramification of the conclusion that Jesus Himself drank wine, though never to excess (a conclusion drawn from His unanswerable denunciation of drunkenness as sin and from His own unimpeach-

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able character, Jn. 8:46; Heb. 4:15), is the dilemma: should we consider the alcoholic a sinner or a sick man? To put the question in other terms: did Jesus escape alcoholism by righteousness (moderation), by maintaining a healthy body, or both?

While modern research has tended to demonstrate the direct connection between long-term embibing and many mental and physical debilities, sicknesses to which both psychological and medical cures must be applied, what is the meaning of the statement: "The alcoholic is a sick man"? This declaration, while declaring an objective reality, is often made with emotional overtones that suggest that the alcoholic can no more be charged with the responsibility for his condition than would a child suffering from measles. On the other hand, some religionists talk as if the alcoholic could be transformed into a proper citizen simply by immediate and permanent swearing off of alcohol, without any recourse to medical or psychological help to repair the damage that has been done to his body, mind, life, as if correcting the alcoholic's responsibility for his weakened condition were the whole of his rehabilitation.

Before we hasten to decide whether the alcoholic is *either* a sick *or* a sinful man, let us remember that some dilemmas are badly stated, including this one. There is a third alternative: the alcoholic may be *both* a sick *and* a sinful man. His sin has made him a sick man. Forgiveness of his sin will not make him a well man. Making him a well man in body and mind, insofar as modern science is able to effect this, will not make him acceptable to God. He must be both saved and healed. His rehabilitation in both these respects may require much time and may witness many set-backs, but it must take place in both areas, i.e. healing of the body and purifying the conscience and reinforcing the will, if the whole man is to be brought back to normalcy.

There is one sad, tragic fact that may face the alcoholic which, repent as he might, he cannot change: damage to his body as the natural consequence of alcohol's ruinous effects. A man may repent a thousand times of his carelessness in handling a powersaw, but his tears and his undoubted change for the good cannot give him back his right arm sawn away in the accident. If this analogy applies to the alcoholic in any way, it becomes a stern warning to any who drink, that alcohol is capable of bringing upon him a blight that no amount of repentance can correct.

Numerous are the instances where Jesus performed this very healing of both body and soul by curing the body and forgiving the

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sin. He not only purified the conscience but also provided the Gospel whereby the whole man can be transformed into a strong, stable character. What is most remarkable is that Jesus held all sinners responsible for the mess into which they get themselves (Cf. Jn. 5:14; Mt. 12:45), especially drunkards (Lk. 21:34; Ro. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:11; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:18). Accordingly, if people were merely sick due to some physical weakness related to causes not dependent upon their choice, then, presumably, Jesus could not justly hold them responsible for the bad results of their actions. So, the fact that He judges men responsible for their drunkenness, lays the charge for failure, not merely upon constitutional weaknesses, but upon the quality of the heart of the individual. Rather than become a scientist or a doctor to heal all mankind by giving out useful remedies or advice on physical health, He dealt with man's fundamental problem: his relation with God and man. If THIS problem be not solved, physical or mental healing if only to live a few more years in constant danger of being corrupted again, solves nothing.

HOW DID JESUS ESCAPE BECOMING AN ALCOHOLIC?

As completely out of place as this query may seem, yet to answer it may lead us to grasp something of the answer to our other question, "Should Jesus' disciple drink wine?" How is it possible to harmonize the potentially catastrophic danger that alcohol represents both to the individual and to society, with Jesus' practice of taking wine? The secret lies in being guided by all the moral directives that prompted Jesus. By taking His view of the world, by having a conscience molded by the will of God and by showing the same forthright obedience to the Father as did He, by knowing no other dependence than upon the daily provision of the Father, one will be pleased to learn that he is not troubled by those diseases that excess and indulgence bring in their wake.

Section 25

JESUS CONDEMNS UNBELIEVING CITIES AND INVITES "BABES" TO COME TO HIM