

Questions & Bible Answers – Drinking of Intoxicants

By Roy Deaver

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QUESTION

“Our preacher mentioned recently that with regard to the drinking of intoxicants the Bible does not demand total abstinence. In an effort to prove this position he cited Ephesians 5:18, and stressed the word ‘excess.’ Does Ephesians 5:18 teach that it is all right for one to drink intoxicants, so long as he does not do so to ‘excess’?”

ANSWER

1. As is recorded in Ephesians 5:18, in the *King James* reading, Paul says: “And be not drunken with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;...”

It is alarming, frustrating, disappointing, and disgusting that some people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ persist in efforts to try to justify the drinking of intoxicants. These often stress the words “moderation” and “temperance,” and we hasten to emphasize that such usage of these words is a MISUSE of these words. “Moderation” and “temperance” apply to that which is right within itself—not to that which is by its very nature sinful. Does anyone really believe that it is all right to practice sin in moderation? Suppose the thief should say to himself: “I would like to steal three automobiles tonight. But, I believe in temperance and moderation, and so—I will just steal one.” One can be “temperate” and “moderate” in eating, because eating is right. One can be “temperate” and “moderate” in sleeping, because sleeping is right.

2. Another word often misused in this connection is the word "social." Reference is often made to "social" drinking. If the word "social" is intended to indicate a proper concern for society, then I can think of no words more paradoxical than the words "social drinking." This is similar to talking about a "civil" war, or an "honest" thief, or a "white" blackbird, or a "sincere" hypocrite.

Further, what about the word "disease"? It is commonly claimed that alcoholism is a "disease." As Peter L. Reamm recently pointed out: "If so, it is the only disease that is contracted by an act of the will. It is the only disease that requires a license to propagate it. It is the only disease that is bottled and sold. It is the only disease that promotes crime. It is the only disease that is habit-forming. It is the only disease that is spread by advertising. It is the only disease that is given for a Christmas present."

3. In *The Spiritual Sword* of July, 1971, page 22, brother Guy N. Woods writes as follows: "In the light of these facts, it is indeed remarkable that there are those who attempt to justify 'moderate drinking,' and excuse 'social' drinkers. Anything which corrupts that which it touches must be, and is, always wrong; and Christians ought to avoid all participation therein. Actually, it is through so-called moderate drinking that most people become alcoholics." Brother Woods also stresses that "Moreover, indulgence to any extent is wrong because drunkenness is a matter of degree, and begins with the first drop of the fiery liquid." He quotes Dr. Ralph Overman as correctly emphasizing: "When you have drunk one drink, you are one drink drunk!" Brother Woods says: "It follows—therefore— as a simple matter of common sense that one should never, under any circumstances, and for any reason, swallow one drop of alcohol for beverage purposes."

4. The problem now under consideration arises at least in part from a misunderstanding of Ephesians 5:18, and—behind this misunderstanding—lies a translation problem. Many words in our

King James Versions do not mean in 1986 exactly what they meant in 1611. Please note that this statement is not a criticism of the King James Version, but is simply a statement of fact, and which points up the constant need for careful study. The English word "excess" as used in 1611 was an accurate rendering of the original. But, as the word "excess" is used in our day, its use in Ephesians 5:18 contributes to a misunderstanding of what Paul actually said.

According to the King James reading, Paul says: "And be not drunken with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit." The American Standard Version has: "And be not drunken with wine, wherein is riot, but be filled with the spirit." Paul, in this statement, is not discussing what drunkenness LEADS TO, but, rather, what is already, inherently, IN IT! And, what is inherently IN IT is given us in the word "excess" in the King James reading and in the word "riot" in the American Standard reading. But, the English word "excess" in 1611, following its Latin derivation, meant "loss of self-possession." In drunkenness (and in drinking) there is loss of self-possession. So, the Record says: "And be not drunken with wine, wherein is loss of self-possession."

5. Upon this background, we turn now to look at the lexicons, translations, and other passages. The key word, so far as concerns the present study, is the Greek word *asotia*.

According to the lexicons, *asotia* means: (1) reckless debauchery (Green), (2) profligacy, incorrigibility (Arndt-Gingrich), (3) riotous living (Thayer), (4) an abandoned course (Berry). Barns refers to "that which is abandoned to sensuality and lust."

What about the translations? (1) We have referred to the King James reading and to the American Standard reading. (2) *The Living Bible Oracles* has "And be not drunk with wine, by which comes dissoluteness " (3) *The Revised Standard Version* has: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery..." (4)

The New English Version has: "Do not give way to drunkenness and the dissipation which goes with *it*." (5) *Montgomery* has: "Do not be drunk with wine, in which is riotous living..." (6) *Williams* has: "Stop getting drunk on wine, for that means profligacy." (7) *The Pulpit Commentary* says: "And be not intoxicated with wine, wherein is dissoluteness." We keep in mind that Paul is not talking about what drunkenness leads to (though that is certainly involved). He is talking about what is IN it. And, what is IN it is identified and described by the Greek word *asotia*. About this word, *Lenski* says: "It describes the condition when the mind and body are dragged down so as to be incapable of spiritual functions."

How could anybody be in the condition (to any extent or to any degree) described by the Greek word *asotia*, and claim (with any degree of justification) to be pleasing to God? The etymological significance of this word, is—in fact—"without salvation."

As indicated earlier, we want to look at this word as it occurs in other passages. (1) We look at Titus 1:6. About an elder, Paul says: "...having children that believe, who are not accused of RIOT or unruly." (2) It is used in 1 Peter 4:4. Peter says: "...wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them into the same excess (flood) of RIOT, speaking evil of you:..." (3) Then, in Luke 15:13, *asotia* is used in adverbial form. The prodigal son "...took his journey into a far country; and there he wasted his substance with riotous living" (literally, living riotously).

6. The notion that Ephesians 5:18 teaches that it is all right in the sight of God for one to drink intoxicants so long as he or she does not do so to an "excess" is unscriptural, antiscritural, ridiculous, preposterous, and absurd!

We close this document with the following argument:

MAJOR PREMISE: All things which war against the soul are

things from which men are commanded to abstain. Proof, 1 Peter 2:11.

MINOR PREMISE: The drinking of intoxicants is a thing which wars against the soul. Proof, consider Hosea 4:11; Proverbs 20:1.

CONCLUSION: Therefore, the drinking of intoxicants is a thing from which men are commanded to abstain.

And, we note, that "abstain" does not mean to practice it in moderation. All persons are commanded to abstain from fornication (Acts 15:29; 1 Thess. 4:3), and this does not mean to practice it in moderation or with temperance!

Route 1, Box 44-D Summerdale, AL 36580