

A Critique of American Evangelicals' Abstinence Position on Alcohol, from Pre-Prohibition to Today

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KEY WORDS

Alcohol | Bible | Prohibition | Christianity | Moderation | Evangelical

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to show that the anti-alcohol sentiment among many North American evangelical Christians is misguided, for several reasons. One, the Bible condemns only the abuse of alcohol, not its use in moderation. Two, evangelical prohibitionists claim that wine in biblical times was watered down and therefore not intoxicating. But this is incorrect, as the wine's alcohol content would have been equivalent to modern "light" beer, and therefore still capable of producing intoxication. Three, the anti-alcohol position was almost unknown during the first 1800 years of the Church, so its emergence in the United States in the 19th century is biblically and theologically suspect. And four, evangelical hysteria over alcohol was partly responsible for the Volstead Act, which outlawed alcohol in the United States from 1920 to 1933, is now generally viewed as a political and moral failure.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Spring 2008 edition of the *Criswell Theological Review*, there were two papers published concerning the issue of the Christian and alcohol. One of the papers, Kenneth L. Gentry Jr.'s "The Bible and the Question of Alcoholic Beverages," took the position that drunkenness is a sin, but that the Bible permits moderate drinking. The other paper, Richard Land and Barrett Duke's "The Christian and Alcohol,"¹ took the position that the Bible teaches that any consumption of

alcohol is a sin which must be avoided. In this paper, I hold the position of moderation that Gentry maintained his essay, and also wish to suggest some things that might make his position even stronger, while at the same time pointing out some of the weaknesses inherent in the position of Land/Duke. In addition to Land/Duke's work, I will also be considering the anti-alcohol position advocated by Norman L. Geisler's "To Drink or Not to Drink: A Sober Look at the Question."² My goal is two-fold. One, to show that the Bible, as well as Church history, are firmly in the moderation, not the abstinence camp, regarding alcohol. And two, to examine the 19th and early 20th-century Evangelical movement in the United States and why it was so vehemently anti-alcohol, when conservative Christianity in Europe was not.

1 "The Christian and Alcohol," Richard Land and Barrett Duke, and "The Bible and the Question of Alcoholic Beverages," Kenneth L. Gentry, *Criswell Theological Review* 5/2 (Spring 2008); 19-38, and 39-52 respectively. This entire issue of *Criswell Theological Review* was devoted to the alcohol question. An additional "moderation" piece found therein is Bill J. Leonard's "They Have No Wine: Wet/Dry Baptists and the Alcohol Issues," 3-17. Leonard makes a powerful case for the moderation viewpoint. I originally contacted *Criswell's* editor to ask if he wanted to publish my contribution to the debate, but he kindly informed me that it is generally not the journal's policy to revisit topics once an entire issue has been devoted to them.

2 Dr. Geisler's article, "To Drink or no to Drink: A Sober Look at the Question," is an internet-only piece, the link for which is located on *Criswell Theological Review's* website, criswell.wordpress.com.

First, let me state that I fully agree with all of the writers above that the Bible does indeed condemn drunkenness. Examples of this abound in scripture to the point where they hardly need to be cited. And I also believe, as Dr. Geisler has pointed out, that alcohol use has an enormous social cost (medical problems, domestic violence, drunk driving, etc.) that cannot be denied. In fact, I think it is safe to say that alcohol probably causes more misery for society than all illegal drugs combined. I do not have statistics at hand to prove this, but just consider how many thousands are killed and badly injured by drunk drivers in the United States each year. There is no evidence that people who, for example, smoke marijuana, are responsible for such a high degree of carnage on our roadways (although, of course, illegal drugs do cause various types of personal harm to those who use them). And when we consider that alcohol is a legal drug, it stands to reason that many more people will abuse it than would abuse illegal narcotics.³ Based on this, my advice to a young Christian, or even a non-Christian, would be to avoid alcohol, as the potential harm it can cause probably outweighs any benefits it might produce. Indeed, there is always the danger of alcoholic addiction, so rather than take the chance of becoming an alcoholic, it seems best if one simply does not begin drinking at all. If Geisler and Land/Duke took this position and stopped there, I would be in full agreement. But when they insist that all social drinking is prohibited in the Bible,⁴ and

3 Despite the obvious harm caused by alcohol abuse, I certainly do not favor a return to Prohibition. Nor do Geisler and Land/Duke, based on their respective essays.

4 Geisler does abandon his total abstinence position under extreme conditions, for instance, when alcohol can be used as a sedative or pain-reliever, as Proverbs 31:6 instructs: "Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish." Geisler also rightly notes that Paul, in 1 Timothy 5:23 suggests that alcohol can be beneficial for stomach ailments (p. 9).

when they imply that even moderate drinking should probably be categorized as sinful behavior, I must respectfully part company with them, the reasons for which I will explain in this essay.

II. HOW STRONG WAS BIBLICAL WINE?

Both advocates of moderation and abstinence can point to numerous passages in the OT and in the NT that lend support to their position, so this alone indicates that the Bible does not condemn *all* drinking in the way that Geisler and Land/Duke suggest. Kenneth Gentry, in his above-mentioned article favoring moderation, shows through exegesis of various OT texts that the abstinence position is not the correct one. In fact, since there are so many condemnations of heavy drinking in scripture, especially in the OT, we can be fairly certain that wine was commonly drunk by the ancient Israelites, and that its common use led, on many occasions, to its abuse. After all, virtually all ancient civilizations had some form of intoxicating beverage or herb that they used for religious ceremonies, or often for pure recreation. It is doubtful that the ancient men and women of the Bible were any different from their pagan neighbors in this regard. In fact, we know from the OT's condemnations of idolatry and religious syncretism that the ancient Jews were *too* much like their pagan neighbors in many ways. "The use of wine was universal among all classes with the exception of those who had taken a vow of abstinence, such as Nazirites and Rechabites. The priest also had to abstain but only when on duty in the sanctuary."⁵

5 James Hastings, ed., "Wine and Strong Drink," in *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1963), 1039.

Dr. Geisler knows that scripture makes numerous references to biblical figures drinking alcohol. Indeed, he recognizes the fact that the biblical world was suffused with this substance. But he makes a distinction between what the Bible terms "strong drink" (which he claims was forbidden) and wine, which was acceptable to drink because it was usually diluted with water. "Studies of ancient customs reveal that biblical wine was fermented, but it was also diluted 3 to 1 when used as a beverage or in connection with the Passover or Communion.... At a 3 to 1 ratio it would take over 20 glasses of NT wine to get drunk!"⁶

First, it is not a settled matter that wine in the Bible was always mixed with water. It does seem to have been the pagan practice to do so,⁷ but why would God's people be always obliged to imitate them? Evangelical scholar Walter A. Elwell says the following. "The evidence, however, seems to indicate that in the OT, wine was used without being mixed with water. The terminology of mixing water and wine is strikingly unattested. Wine diluted with water was symbolic of spiritual adulteration (Is. 1:22)."⁸ And even if wine was cut with water, we have no evidence that this was *always* the case in biblical times.

Regardless of how wine was or was not diluted in OT times, I have no quarrel with Geisler's belief that it was, at least sometimes, mixed with water in NT times. But, if drinking any amount of alcohol is sinful, would not even a mixture of pure wine and water contain enough alcohol to violate the Bible's alleged prohibition on alcoholic intake? Geisler states

that "[S]ince good drinking water was not readily available for most people in the first century, purification was necessary."⁹ But this still would involve people consuming alcohol. And Geisler's assertion that it would take over 20 glasses of diluted NT wine to get drunk does not hold up. The average wine is about 12 to 14 per cent alcohol by volume, and can go as high as 15 per cent, according to Land/Duke.¹⁰ If we assume Geisler's three-to-one ratio, and a wine of 14 to 15 per cent alcohol by volume, that *still* produces a diluted beverage of close to 4 per cent alcohol by volume. Equally damning, Geisler admits that the Bible never specifies that wine should follow this 3- to-one ratio.¹¹ Elwell states that "[a] natural, nondistilled wine could reach as high as 15 percent alcohol content. If watered down 3 parts water to 1 part wine, the alcohol content would be 5 percent and still fairly potent."¹² This is the strength of today's typical beer, a Budweiser or a Heineken ("lite" beer, like Miller Lite, is about 4 per cent alcohol by volume, as is most traditional British cask-conditioned ale). Surely it does not take 20 glasses of a 4 or 5 per cent alcohol-by-volume beer to get drunk. And of course, there was no biblical commandment that the mixture had to follow this 3 parts water, one part wine ratio. A ratio that contained less water would, of course, produce a beverage with more alcohol in it. There is no evidence in the Bible that wine was

6 Geisler, "To Drink or Not to Drink," p. 4.

7 See Robert H. Stein, "Wine-Drinking in New Testament Times," accessed at: <http://www.swartzentover.com/cotor/bible/Doctrines/Holiness/Drugs%20&%20Alcohol/Wine-Drinking%20in%20New%20Testament%20Times.htm>.

8 Walter A. Elwell, "Wine," in Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 2 (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, MI): 2147.

9 Geisler, "To Drink or Not to Drink," 4

10 Land/Duke, "The Christian and Alcohol," 29.

11 Norman L. Geisler, Christian Ethics (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 370. His main support for this equation seems to be the Babylonian Talmud, which "asserts that Passover wine was three parts water to one part one wine" (362). But there are two problems here. One, the Talmud is referring to Passover wine, not everyday drinking wine. And two, there is no way to know if the Talmud's 3-to-1 ratio was always followed in New Testament times. But again, all of this is moot, as 3-to-1 wine would still be an intoxicating drink.

12 Elwell, "Wine," 2147.

always diluted with the same wine/water ratio, so it is impossible to say how strong the wine was across the centuries of the Biblical record.

Land/Duke would answer by saying that the wine of biblical times was much weaker even before it was diluted: biblical wine, they claim, “was around two to six per cent.”¹³ But these figures seem doubtful. Why would grapes in the ancient world produce a much lower alcohol content than grapes do today? The fermentation process has not changed since mankind discovered wine thousands of years ago. Professor R.A. Baker, commenting on wine strength in the ancient world, states that “the juice of grapes, under natural circumstances, will have an alcoholic content of 10-17%.”¹⁴ An article in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* opts for a slightly lower level of alcohol for wine, stating that the limit is 14 per cent.¹⁵ A publication associated with the prestigious Culinary Institute of America lists the average strength of wine as 12 per cent alcohol by volume, with certain wines achieving a level of 14.5.¹⁶ While there is variation in the strength of wine, it seems likely that wines produced in the dry, hot climate of the Middle East would tend toward the more potent side of the equation:

As grapes ripen on the vine, the sugar levels rise in the presence of increased heat and light—in a word, sunshine—during the growing season. At the same time, the heat and humidity levels affect the acidity levels in grapes. In general, hot, dry conditions drive the acid levels down. So,

the cooler the climate, the higher the acid levels; the warmer the climate, the higher the sugar levels.... Most importantly, the sugar content of the grapes at harvest will determine the maximum level of alcohol produced during fermentation.¹⁷

Aside from the facts of fermentation science, another problem with the position that wine in biblical times was much weaker than today’s versions concerns its purifying qualities. If wine was primarily used for purifying bacteria-laden water, as many who hold the abstinence position believe, it is hard to imagine how Land/Duke’s weak wine of only 2 to 6 per cent alcohol by volume could have much of a sterilizing effect, especially if it was being mixed with water, with water making up two thirds to three fourths of the concoction. This is important because the purifying effects of wine on polluted water are often cited by abstinence advocates as one of the few (if not only) benefits and “moral” purposes of wine in biblical times. But I would not trust a beverage with an alcohol level of only one or two percent by volume to save me from harmful parasites in my drinking water.

III. CHRIST AND WINE

So even if we accept the position that biblical wine was diluted, Geisler and Land/Duke still have to account for the fact that what was being consumed in biblical times was indeed an intoxicating beverage. Even Land/Duke admit that such diluted wine was strong enough to cause drunkenness if abused.¹⁸ But this is precisely my point; the Bible does not condemn the consumption of alcohol, only its misuse. Either people in biblical times consumed alcohol, or they did not. Either the Bible

13 Ibid, 29.

14 R.A. Baker, “Early Church History: Wine in the Ancient World,” as accessed at <http://churchhistory101.com/wine-alcohol-bible.php>.

15 “Alcoholic Drinks,” R.V. Pierard, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Baker Books, 1984), 28.

16 Steve Kaplan, Brian H. Smith, and Michael A. Weiss, *Exploring Wine* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1996), 18.

17 Ibid., 10.

18 Land/Duke, “The Christian and Alcohol,” 30.

forbids all use of alcohol, or it does not. Some abstinence Christians have attempted to avoid this dilemma with recourse to the "Biblical-wine-was-not-fermented" argument, but Geisler and Land/Duke deserve credit for rejecting this linguistically and exegetically indefensible position. Yet despite their honesty in admitting that Biblical wine contained alcohol, they still seem to have trouble reconciling their total abstinence position with the obvious examples of wine-drinking in scripture. It is therefore not surprising that neither Geisler nor Land/Duke have much of a rebuttal for Christ's miracle at Cana in John 2:1-11. Consider Land/Duke's comments on Christ's wine-making miracle: "[F]irst, we cannot be positive that what Jesus created had alcoholic content. The headwaiter may have been commenting on how good the wine tasted not its alcoholic content."¹⁹ This is certainly a case of special pleading, for whenever the Bible speaks of wine, it is speaking of fermented grape juice. Even Geisler himself takes pains to point out that when scriptures speaks of wine, "Welch's Grape Juice" is never intended.²⁰

Second, the waiter is obviously someone who has had a fair amount of experience as a wine taster. That is clear when he says that the wine Jesus created is the type of special wine that is usually served at the end of the meal, when the guests are too intoxicated to be able to discern poor from high quality wine. It is quite doubtful that the waiter would have given such approval to unfermented grape juice (he would not even have called such a beverage wine, as Geisler has shown). Additionally, neither Geisler nor Land/Duke comment on the fact that the waiter admits that it was customary for guests at a wedding to over-indulge a bit; only after a fairly

large amount of low-quality wines had dulled their palates (and their senses) would the guests not be able to tell that they were drinking a "higher end" product. Christ must have known that such over-indulgence sometimes occurred at Jewish weddings, but he never speaks out against it. In fact, he miraculously creates even more wine for the guests to drink. I do not wish to claim that Christ in this passage encouraged drunkenness, but he obviously was not draconian in his attitude toward alcohol. When pondering why Jesus would have performed such a miracle (leaving aside any Johannine theological symbolism inherent in the act), the most likely reason is that he wanted his friends at the wedding feast to enjoy themselves, and celebrate the joyous event with some of the superb wine he had given them.

Third, Land/Duke state that "the text never says that Jesus drank any of this wine."²¹ This is true, but seems a moot point, since the authors admit, just a few sentences earlier, that Jesus did indeed drink on occasion. And whether Jesus drank any of the wedding wine or not, he is responsible for others drinking it, so to condemn wine as sinful is to implicate Christ in causing others to sin. In what can be called a last-ditch effort to put a positive abstinence spin on the events at Cana, Land/Duke quote the following passage in one of their footnotes:

The process of fermentation is one of decay, and it is not probable that it would have been initiated, or its results realized, by the fiat of the Saviour.... To produce pure grape-juice, the unfermented fruit of the vine, would, if possible to man, be a closer imitation of the creative plan of Providence than calling a fermenting substance into existence.... It is against the principle of scriptural and moral analogy to suppose that the Saviour exerted His supernatural energy to bring into being a

¹⁹ Land and Duke, "The Christian and Alcohol," 32.

²⁰ Geisler, "To Drink or Not to Dink," 8.

²¹ Land/Duke, "The Christian and Alcohol," 32.

kind of wine which had been condemned by Solomon and the prophets as a 'mockery' and 'defrauder,' and which the Holy Spirit had selected as an emblem of the wrath of the almighty... [also counting against the idea that the wine was alcoholic is] the fact that the Lord did in moments what normally takes months to achieve—the process of turning water into 'the pure blood of the grape.'²²

To their credit, Land/Duke do not wholeheartedly endorse these ideas, but nor do they "deny the plausibility of these arguments."²³ Of course these arguments are plausible; almost any argument can be. The question is, will such arguments convince anyone who does not hold an *a priori* abstinence position. Ironically, this passage, which attempts to preserve Christ as the champion who upholds his Father's moral standards, actually achieves an unintended effect. It lessens Christ's miraculous power by suggesting that he could not have created alcoholic wine instantly, since nature herself requires many days to complete the task. If Christ had trouble by-passing nature's long process for wine-making, it is hard to believe that he could have overcome nature in other miraculous ways, such as healing the lame, walking on water, or raising the dead.

Bowing to the inevitable, Land/Duke address the attempt of Christ's enemies' to discredit him by calling him a glutton and a drunkard for his associations with the common folk. They write that Jesus "does seem, however, to indicate that he did not totally abstain from beverages that had any alcohol content."²⁴ If Christ himself did not abstain completely from alcohol, it is hard to see how the authors can support their

abstinence position. Land/Duke attempt to soften the impact of Christ's drinking by stating that Jesus "doesn't appear to have engaged in the practice because he felt it was his right to do so. Unfortunately, he doesn't say why. For his critics it was enough that he socialized with 'sinners.' Because of this socializing they attempted to discredit him in the eyes of the people, and he was not apologetic for that."²⁵

The first thing that is odd about this passage is the idea that alcohol is a "right" to be defended. Christian advocates of moderate drinking rarely claim that drinking is a "right." Rather, they claim that it is not sinful, or that it is not forbidden in scripture, which seems to be Christ's position here. He is not even bothered by the fact that he is referred to as a drunkard (although I agree with Land/Duke that Jesus never drank to excess, for this would be sinful behavior, and evangelical Christians are in agreement that Christ did not sin). What bothers Christ is, as Land/Duke rightly point out, is the fact the Christ's enemies use the drunkard slander only as an excuse not to believe in Christ's divine mission.²⁶ The charge of drunkenness is irrelevant for Jesus, for he has, so to speak, bigger theological fish to fry.

Then of course there is the initiation of the Lord's Supper, where Christ not only shares wine with his disciples, but even tells them that he will not again drink wine with them until they drink it together in the Kingdom of the Father. Even if one were to assume that alcohol is a sin God tolerates on earth, it is hard to imagine that it would be permitted in God's kingdom if it is indeed the sin that abstinence advocates believe it to be. And the position that wine was needed in biblical times to purify polluted water will not be applicable in the eschatological kingdom to

22 Frederic Richard Lees and Dawson Burns, *The Temperance Bible-Commentary* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1868), 304-5.

23 Land/Duke, "The Christian and Alcohol," 33.

24 Land/Duke, "The Christian and Alcohol," 32.

25 *Ibid.*, 32.

26 *Ibid.*, 32.

come, for surely there is no polluted water in the paradise for which Christians eagerly await. Of course, Christ may be speaking metaphorically, his meaning something like, "I will not again share a meal of fellowship with you until the kingdom comes." But it is strange that he would use wine imagery here, if indeed wine is the great evil that its critics contend it is. And if Christ did not use wine at the Last Supper, and the earliest Christian churches did not use it in their services, then where did the tradition of using wine in the Eucharistic celebration originate?

Walter Elwell's comments on this matter are worth noting. "Evidence strongly suggests that the wine used at the Lord's Supper was a mixture of water and wine, probably three to one in agreement with the dictates of the Mishna. The phrase "fruit of the vine" (Mt 26:27—29) is often interpreted to mean fresh grape juice. However, fresh grape juice would be all but impossible to find."²⁷ This is because it "is improbable that with the means at their disposal the Jews could have done so [preserved grape juice in an unfermented state] even had they so desired. Unfermented wine was not known in that ancient time."²⁸

IV. WINE AND CHRISTIANITY

I think it is true that even if one can find approval in scripture for drinking in moderation, this does not mean that Christians should *necessarily* drink. Land/Duke are on solid ground, I think, when they explain that a non-drinking Christian will have a better chance of success when trying to evangelize someone who has himself struggled with alcohol, or who has had a family member harmed in some way by

drinking. However, I think the authors press the point a bit too far when they write that

[w]hile some have argued that they find greater acceptance among a certain subset of the population because they drink with them, this is not the case for the vast majority of people who need to be reached with the Gospel. In fact, many lost people have certain expectations of Christians, and one is that they do not drink. Many of the lost recognize this as a distinguishing feature between Christians who are serious about their faith and those outside the faith.²⁹

First, the authors do not cite evidence or statistics for the claim that the "vast majority" of the lost would be more receptive to non-drinking Christians. How do they know this is the case? Certainly this would hold true in some Muslim countries, where alcohol is forbidden by Islamic teaching (although evangelization in most of them is illegal or often so difficult as to prove largely ineffective). But in the United States, and in Europe, where non-Christians are accustomed to an alcohol-infused culture, why would the vast majority be more receptive to the Christian message if it comes with the message of total abstinence? I doubt that many non-Christians are even aware that some Protestants uphold the abstinence position, for two reasons. One, they may know Roman Catholics, for whom drinking is not the debated issue it is in fundamentalist Protestant circles. And two, even most non-Christians know that Christianity uses wine in its central sacrament, the Eucharist, so why would they expect Christians to have a rabidly anti-alcohol attitude?

Additionally, few non-Christians consider drinking to be sinful, so it is highly doubtful that such a person would be impressed by a Christian who avoids what is not deemed

²⁷ Elwell, "Wine," 2148.

²⁸ Hastings, "Wine and Strong Drink," 1039.

²⁹ Land/Duke, "The Christian and Alcohol," 34.

sinful in the first place. Most non-Christians would be about as impressed with a Christian's avoidance of alcohol as he or she would be by a Muslim's eschewal of pork, another practice that no secular person considers to be morally wrong (unless of course he is a card-carrying member of PETA). Also, it must be realized that many non-Christians in the West object to Christianity precisely because they perceive it as legalistic, dull, and out of date, and a religion that demands total abstinence will be rejected out of hand by many who will find this requirement to be puritanical. Perhaps St. Paul's approach is needed here. The Christian witness must attempt to be all things to all men. If trying to convert one whose life has been adversely affected by alcohol, the Christian could cite all the biblical prohibitions against drunkenness. If the Christian's unsaved friend is a drinker, the Christian may find an opening for his message by sharing a beer or two with the friend over a football game. But in the end, what will impress non-Christians about Christian behavior in the modern world are those same things that impressed pagans about Christians when the faith first appeared in the ancient world: their living, authentic examples of love, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice.

V. WHY THE DEBATE OVER ALCOHOL AMONG NORTH AMERICAN EVANGELICALS?

For those outside of the North American context, the battle within the evangelical Christian movement over the abstinence vs. moderation position can be hard to understand. After all, European Christianity has never had a comparable debate over the nature of consuming alcohol. Other than Iceland from 1915-1921, no European country experienced anything

like the "noble experiment" of Prohibition. Prohibition was, of course, the popular name for the Volstead Act, the 18th Amendment to the United States Constitution that forbade the production, sale (and by implication) the consumption of alcohol. It was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1919, and not repealed by Congress until 1933.

Now, Prohibition is generally credited as a failure by most Americans, be they laypersons or professional historians. Those who wanted to drink still did, but they had to buy their potables from criminals, rather than from government-authorized sellers. This had the dual effect of destroying the tax revenues the government could obtain from the sale of alcoholic beverages, and it also enabled small-time criminal gangs to make the huge sums of money needed to morph into potent organized crime families. And let's not forget the thousands upon thousands who lost their jobs in taverns, breweries, and distilleries with the onset of Prohibition. Regarding the illegal money made by gangsters during Prohibition, a similar situation exists today with the drug cartels of Central and South America, which have grown fabulously wealthy and powerful from the illegal drug trade.³⁰

But despite the consensus about the Volstead Act, there are Christians in the United States who look back upon Prohibition fondly. For instance, Sara F. Ward is a member of the anti-alcohol Woman's Christian Temperance Union. The group had its heyday in the period leading up to Prohibition, but still exists today. She does

³⁰ What happened with alcohol during Prohibition is now being revisited in the marijuana legalization debate in the United States. Two states, Colorado and Washington State, have already fully legalized the drug, and several more, mainly Western states, are expected to follow. In addition, many states have legalized so-called medical marijuana, which allows physicians to give patients prescriptions to obtain the drug in state-sanctioned stores for a variety of medical conditions, often ones involving chronic pain.

not advocate a return to Prohibition, for she writes “[i]n today’s society, with the emphasis on personal liberty, it is not conceivable that alcohol would be prohibited nationwide.”³¹ But she goes on to cite favorably the numerous health benefits that resulted from Prohibition, including: large decreases in domestic violence, assault, and various health-related issues.³² But I suspect one could challenge the statistics she cites in her article. It is easy to imagine that alcohol-related problems did decrease during the first few years of Prohibition, but those numbers must have eventually increased, for three reasons. One, during Prohibition, women began to visit so-called “speakeasies” (the name derived from the fact that one had to “speak” a password to gain entrance) where hard liquor, much more so than beer,³³ was sold. This was ironic because one of the strongest arguments in the prohibitionists’ arsenal was that husbands were squandering all their money in the saloons, leaving their families neglected. Ward herself states that “protection of the home” is the motto for her organization.³⁴ But prohibition had all but wiped out the drinking saloon, once the exclusive domain of men, and in the more lax atmosphere of the Roaring 1920’s, women were drinking far more than ever before because they were accompanying men to speakeasies.³⁵

The second reason is, once alcohol became illegal, Americans were hard-pressed to drink in a leisurely fashion. Prohibition “was

counterproductive because it encouraged the heavy and rapid consumption of alcohol in secretive, nonsocially regulated and controlled ways [i.e., the speakeasy].” One did not go to a speakeasy for one or two drinks; the purpose of the visit was to get drunk.³⁶

The third reason to doubt that Americans became bastions of physical health during Prohibition is that so much of the illegally made alcohol often contained impurities that were dangerous, indeed fatal, for human consumption. 1927 saw twelve thousand people die because of such bootleg liquor, while in 1930 some fifteen thousand persons developed “jake foot,” a type of paralysis caused by drinking bootleg booze.³⁷

But even if Ward’s health figures cannot be contradicted, this in no way proves that the Bible forbids the use of alcohol, even though Christianity and the Bible were *the* basis of the Prohibition movement as far as American Evangelicals were concerned. Ward tries, but she falls into the fermented vs. unfermented wine argument (i.e., that when the Bible talks of wine, it is only referring to “new,” or unfermented wine). This argument was often used by alcohol abolitionists before the advent of Prohibition to prove that the Bible never talks of “real,” fermented wine.³⁸ The problem with the argument is that, even at the time of the American Civil War (and by implication in biblical times), “scientific knowledge did not yet exist to prevent grapes from fermenting if crushed and converted into juice.” It took

31 Sara F. Ward, “Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” *Criswell Theological Review* 5/2 (Spring 2008), 60.

32 *Ibid.*, 60-61. Her source for her information is E. Deets Pickett, *Truth About Prohibition: Then and Now* (Columbus, OH: School and College Press, 1963).

33 This was ironic because beer, as well as hard (fermented) cider were often advocated in early America as weaker alternatives to potent spirits.

34 Ward, “Woman’s Christian Temperance Union,” 53.

35 Jack S. Blocker, Jr., “Did Prohibition Really Work?” Accessed at: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1470475/>.

36 David J. Hanson, “National Prohibition of Alcohol in the U.S.” Accessed at: http://www2.potsdam.edu/alcohol/Controversies/1091124904.html#.UwAoy_ldWn8, p. 6.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

38 Ward, “Women’s Christian Temperance Union,” 68-69. Her analysis of Hebrew and Greek words makes no reference to recognized scholars of those languages. Indeed, even noted evangelical scholar and abstinence advocate Norman Geisler, as noted above, admits that the word “wine” in the Bible always means fermented wine.

Thomas Welch, a committed prohibitionist, to devise a fairly elaborate system whereby he could create non-alcoholic wine which he called “Dr. Welch’s Unfermented Grape Juice,” and which we know today simply as Welch’s grape juice.³⁹

America has always been very much a populist country, and scholarly theology often took a back seat to emotional presentation by American preachers. In fact, revival-style preachers were instrumental in the spread of Christianity westward, away from the population centers of the East Coast. “In the rough-hewn frontier society, drunkenness often seemed more the norm than the exception, and concerns about intoxication became one of numerous issues that prompted a growing number of clergy to learn that without appropriate evangelization the frontier would succumb to barbarism.”⁴⁰ Drinking saloons in the Western part of the U.S. were often lawless establishments in lawless territories. Such saloons have acquired a stereotypical reputation because of their portrayal in American western movies, but they were indeed places where drinking, violence, and prostitution often flourished. Thus American taverns in the West were “dens of iniquity” in ways that pubs in crowded, well-regulated European towns usually were not, at least not in recent centuries. This in part explains why temperance groups grew in the U.S. but not in Europe. In the U.S., the saloon was often a place where greater sins than drunkenness occurred. If violence and sexual debauchery, things most Christians agreed were morally wrong, occurred in liquor houses, it stood to reason that liquor itself was equally evil, or at least that it lead to these grave

39 Andrew Barr, *Drink: A Social History of America* (NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 1999), 362.

40 Leonard, “They Have No Wine,” 9.

sins. Thus, “the nineteenth-century revivals and temperance crusades represented an early ecumenical movement that brought together a variety of Protestant groups.... Evangelical revivalists made abstinence a sign of true conversion, insisting that alcohol inhibited the world of the Spirit in the life of the believer.”⁴¹ In fact, the age-old question for Christians, how do we know if another person is saved? was often answered by frontier preachers who “could only look at a man’s behavior for some visible proof of conversion. One such proof was abstinence from alcoholic drinks.”⁴²

Also, in America in the mid-1800s, most American Evangelicals awaited the return of Christ with a post-millennial⁴³ understanding of that event. That is, Jesus would come back after Christians had thoroughly Christianized the globe and made it fit for His coming. Among the things that must vanish before his coming were slavery and the drinking of alcohol.⁴⁴ All of this is quite important for understanding how the way was paved toward Prohibition, for such Evangelical movements as described above were not fringe movements with little influence. George Marsden writes that “the revivalists’ emphases on simple Bible preaching in a fervent style that would elicit dramatic conversion experiences set the standards for much of American Protestantism. Since Protestantism was by far the dominant religion in the United

41 Ibid., 10.

42 Barr, *Drink*, 358.

43 The other two views of the Second Coming Are the Post-Millennial, and the A-Millennial. In the former, it is Christ who must cleanse the earth of wickedness before establishing his 1000-year reign on the planet. This view is the most popular of the three with the majority of today’s American fundamentalists. The later view teaches that there will be no millennial kingdom, and that the 1000-year reign of Christ is probably best taken symbolically.

44 Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800-1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. See, 1998), 18.

States until the mid-nineteenth century, evangelicalism shaped the most characteristic style of American religion."⁴⁵ A good example of such preaching is the famed evangelist Billy Sunday, best-remembered today for his so-called "Booze Sermon." In it he rails against the evils of drink in a sometimes impassioned, sometimes folksy, sometimes humorous manner. The sermon does indeed make a strong case that alcohol is destructive, but his arguments are social, not biblical or theological. When he does venture into theological territory, his claim that not only those who drink alcohol, but those who sell it to them will be damned to hell, it reveals just how strongly Sunday and others like him felt about alcohol, even if scriptural teaching was not always on their side.⁴⁶

Aside from the rough-and-tumble nature of nineteenth-century American drinking establishments, there was another element to the growing American Christian aversion to alcohol, and that can be traced to anti-immigrant sentiment. Even so liberal an American theologian as Walter Rauschenbusch could write in 1907 that "the increase in drinking was...related to foreign influence."⁴⁷ He saw drinking not so much as sinful in the biblical sense, but as morally and physically destructive to the gospel-based social utopia he and others were trying to create. But his demonization of alcohol is a bit odd, not only because of his reputation for fathering the liberal "social gospel" movement (which saw its primary duties as the eradication of poverty,

the improvement of labor unions, etc.) in the United States, but because he was of German stock himself. This is significant because most of America's large brewers, headquartered in the Midwest, were started by German brewers. German names like Miller, Pabst, Schiltz and Schaffer dominated the American beer scene for much of the 20th century, until the rise of Budweiser relegated them to second-rate status in the 1970s and 1980s. Given the popularity of beer on American college campuses today, it was prophetic when Rauschenbusch spoke of the growing popularity of beer on university campuses as the introduction of "a foreign custom into American life."⁴⁸

With the advent of World War 1, which started just five years before the Volstead Act was enacted, Americans felt they had strong reasons to despise the Germans. In addition to their gluttonous drinking habits, they seemed to be the aggressors in a war of which most Americans wanted no part, but feared they would be pulled into just the same. Many German immigrants from the mid 1800's onward had come from southern Germany, the Roman Catholic part of that country, and did not share the puritanical views of many Americans on drinking. One complaint lodged against them was not so much that they drank, but that their drinking did not permit them to sufficiently honor the Sabbath: "they [Germans] go to church at the Beer [sic] shop and go home drunk at night."⁴⁹

Aside from questions of personal piety, there was an organization in the early 1900's called the German-American Alliance. It made two mistakes. One, it supported Germany in

45 George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 2.

46 William "Billy" Sunday, "The Famous 'Booze' Sermon," *Criswell Theological Review* 5/2 (spring 2008), 90. Sunday seems to base his thinking here on Paul's admonitions in 1 Cor. 6:9-10, which states drunkards will not inherit the kingdom of God. But of course most people who drink are not drunkards, and Paul does not hold sellers of alcohol responsible for those who abuse it.

47 Leonard, "They Have No Wine," 12.

48 Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* ed. Robert D. Cross (NY: Harper and Row, 1964), 376.

49 *Ibid.*, 33.

the early years of World War I.⁵⁰ And two, as stated above, one of the most visible signs of the large German presence in America was the large lager breweries (German lager beer having replaced English-style ale as America's beer of choice), almost all of them founded by Germans with obviously German-sounding names. "As popular denunciation of 'the Hun' grew shriller with American entry into the war, the brewers' missteps allowed hyper patriots to condemn" major brewers like Pabst and Schlitz as traitorous enemies of the United States.⁵¹ Thus, "in the superheated atmosphere of wartime, brewers and their saloons were transformed from metaphorical into literal enemies of the republic."⁵²

Before and after the turn of the 20th century, large numbers of Irish immigrants made their way to American shores. Again, there was a double reason that American evangelicals were distrustful of them. First, they were Roman Catholics, and Protestant America often lumped them together with African Americans, so great was their disdain for them. Also, they had the reputation of being heavy drinkers. "The great majority of Irish immigrants were young, penniless, male refugees from famine. Driven by familiar customs, their straitened circumstances in America, they drank whiskey, often to excess, in 'bachelor groups.'"⁵³ This heavy drinking only exacerbated what established Americans already hated the Irish for, namely their "poverty and Catholicism."⁵⁴

But it was not just the Irish; Catholics at that time were coming to America from various parts of Europe. Because Protestant parts of

Europe never had experienced anything like mass immigration of mostly Roman Catholics from Southern and Eastern Europe around the turn of the century, there was never a comparable backlash as there was in the U.S. These Catholics "insisted on practicing what many Protestants regarded as an un-American style of worship, full of reverence and ritual. By rejecting the use of wine in the Eucharist⁵⁵, and by ceasing to drink wine with their meals, native-born American Protestants demonstrated their disapproval of Catholic immigrants and their old-country practices."⁵⁶ Even after Prohibition was repealed, many counties in the South remained "dry," for these counties were almost entirely Protestant, and could not shake off the association of alcohol, especially wine, with despised Roman Catholicism.⁵⁷

Protestant prohibitionists are forcing a view of alcohol onto the biblical data that would have been utterly foreign to those living in biblical times. And it is not just those who lived in Bible times who would not have understood the total abstinence position. If the Bible so clearly teaches that all drinking is a sin, then why was this fact not noticed by the great Protestant thinkers of the past? Martin Luther apparently had no reservations about drinking beer (good German that he was), or wine for that matter. Writing to a friend about his impending wedding, Luther wrote: "I am to be married on Thursday. My lord Katie [his wife] and I invite you to send a barrel of the best Torgau beer, and if it is not good, you will have to drink it

50 Ibid., 144.

51 Ibid., 145.

52 Ibid., 145.

53 Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum*, 33.

54 Ibid., 33.

55 Today in many of the conservative Protestant churches I have attended, grape juice, not wine, is used for communion. This is partly due to the old wine/Catholicism connection, perhaps, but there is also a more practical reason for it. For those in the congregation who are recovered alcoholics, grape juice is certainly a means of erring on the side of caution.

56 Barr, *Drink*, 363.

57 Ibid., 363.

all yourself.” In another, later letter to his wife, he complains that he misses the comforts of home, and says, “I keep thinking what good wine and beer I have at home.”⁵⁸ And that other great reformer, John Calvin, in typical French fashion, enjoyed his wine. Writing in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he says “[w]e are nowhere forbidden to laugh, or to be satisfied with food . . . or to be delighted with music, or to drink wine.”⁵⁹

Lest anyone think that Christian drinking was purely a European phenomenon, we need only consider the Puritans who settled New England. “Those who came to the American colonies...generally accepted the Puritan norms for the use of alcoholic beverages. While seventeenth-century New England Puritans cautioned against drunkenness, and disciplined church members accordingly, they did not eschew the use of spirits all together.”⁶⁰ It is hard to imagine, that Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans, diligent students of scripture that they were, would have consumed alcohol if the Bible truly forbids it. Those who claim the moral high ground in the debate must not only claim a greater personal holiness than such luminaries as Luther and Calvin, but must also explain why these brilliant expositors of scripture found nothing in the Bible forbidding the consumption of alcohol.

Now, these great thinkers were not sinless, a prohibitionist might claim, so their sinful indulgence in alcohol should not surprise us. But surely they would have been aware of the many places in the Bible where total abstinence is allegedly taught? And if so, why would they

habitually break the clear teachings of scripture, while attempting so strenuously to live by all its other dictates? The reason is simple: “[n]either Judaism nor Christianity requires abstinence, unlike Buddhism and Islam.”⁶¹ Most Christians would view Islam as a religion based upon works-righteousness; one must follow the rules of Islam in order to earn salvation. Things like avoiding alcohol and pork are part of the required works to please God and secure a place in heaven. But it is precisely this kind of legalism that Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, is against. Christians are saved through grace, not through the avoidance of certain foods and drinks.

The modern American Protestant fundamentalist eschewal of all alcohol is precisely that, a modern position that simply is not reflected in the history of the Church world-wide. Today’s non-drinking American fundamentalist Protestants have a weak pedigree, tracing their position back as far as only the anti-alcohol trends of the 1800’s, largely fueled by women’s Christian temperance groups in the 19th century, the emotionalist appeal of American preachers, anti-Catholic resentment, and anti-German sentiment during the first World War. Ultimately, all this culminated in the social disaster known as Prohibition. This is not to say that there had not been anti-alcohol movements in the Christian community prior to the 1800’s. There were, but they were not widespread or of long-lasting importance. The Methodist movement that began in the 1700’s “was one of the first to take a strong stand for complete abstinence.”⁶² Prior to that, a few religious medieval orders eschewed alcohol, and in the 1500’s some temperance societies

58 Quoted in Jim West, *Drinking With Calvin and Luther!* (Oakdown: Lincoln, CA, 2003), 28, 29.

59 Ibid., 53.

60 Bill J. Leonard, “They Have no Wine: Wet/Dry Baptists and the Alcohol Issues,” *Criswell Theological Review*, 5/2 (Spring 2008), 8.

61 Pierard, “Alcoholic Drinks,” 28.

62 R. Alan Streett, “Christians and Alcohol,” *Criswell Theological Review*, volume 5/ 2 (2008), 1.

did indeed appear.⁶³ There were government efforts to combat the abuse of inexpensive gin in England, especially in London, in the 1700's. But the government's goal was to stop abuse, not to outlaw alcohol completely.⁶⁴

VI. CRACKS IN AMERICAN EVANGELICALISM'S ABSTINENCE ARMOR?

Despite all that has been said so far about the phenomenon of North American Evangelicals eschewing alcohol, there are signs that this position is changing. For instance, in 2013, The Moody Bible Institute, an evangelical/fundamentalist Bible college in Chicago, "dropped its ban on alcohol and tobacco consumption," while still insisting that employees must follow prohibitions which can be considered "biblical absolutes" (presumably things like sex outside of marriage, which the New Testament clearly teaches against).⁶⁵ The implication here being that the Bible does not clearly forbid drinking, the way it does things like adultery or lying. Two years before that, America's most prestigious evangelical institute of higher learning, Wheaton College, also lifted the ban on alcohol for faculty, staff, and graduate students (a moot point for undergraduates, who are for the most part under the age of 21, the legal drinking age in the United States). However, the lifting of the ban only applies

to the off-campus lives of those at Wheaton; alcohol on school grounds is still not allowed.⁶⁶

Why these changes? Partly because these schools want to achieve "cultural acceptance," not just within the non-Christian segments of society, but within the evangelical community itself, where a 2010 survey revealed that 40 per cent of evangelical leaders consume alcohol in moderation.⁶⁷ Even among America's Baptists, who are among the nation's most theologically conservative Christians, especially on the abstinence issue, there are rumblings of discontent regarding the total ban on drinking. The fact that in 2007, The Florida Baptist Convention had to re-affirm its opposition to alcohol "suggests that there is widespread difference of opinion, even among those who affirm the confession of faith, biblical inerrancy and other dogmas widely accepted by the Convention and its member churches."⁶⁸ One year earlier, even the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Baptist denomination in the United States, was forced to re-affirm its complete opposition to even moderate drinking.⁶⁹ Obviously, this would not have been necessary had there been no dissent within the ranks. This is not to say that Baptists are on their way to eventually embracing alcohol to a man, for "the abstinence emphasis is so strong and so deep in certain Baptist traditions, often because of personal or family problems with excessive alcohol, that many will never entertain another option." Still, many Baptists are reconsidering the alcohol issue, as they "realize that the moderate use of alcohol is practiced

63 R. V. Pierard, "Alcohol," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Ed. Walter A. Elwell. (Grand Rapids:, Baker Book House 1984), 28.

64 Ernest L. Abel, "The Gin epidemic: Much Ado About What?" As accessed at: <http://alcalc.oxfordjournals.org/content/36/5/401.full>.

65 Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Moody Bible Institute Drops Alcohol and Tobacco Ban for Employees," accessed at: <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2013/9/25/moody-bible-institute-drops-alcohol-and-tobacco-ba/>, 1.

66 *Ibid.*, 1.

67 *Ibid.*, 1.

68 Leonard, "They Have No Wine," 4.

69 Thomas S. Kidd, "How Evangelicals Lost Their Way on Alcohol," as accessed at: <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/How-Evangelicals-Lost-Their-Way-on-Alcohol-Thomas-S-Kidd-01-12-2011.html>, 1.

by many conservative believers without being a litmus test of personal morality or orthodox theology.⁷⁰

VII. CONCLUSION

To claim that the Old and New Testaments forbid all drinking simply is not the case. Wine was consumed in both Testaments, be it full-strength wine or a still somewhat potent mixture of wine and water. Jesus himself drank wine, and he created wine at the wedding feast in Cana for others to enjoy. And the majority of Christian people down through the ages were not advocates of abstinence. Since these arguments on behalf of moderate drinking cannot be refuted, it seems pointless to insist on the abstinence position, especially when the Bible clearly distinguishes between the moderate, and immoderate, use of alcohol. In the end, it must be admitted that drinking is not forbidden by either scripture, Church history, or majority Christian practice.

Still, Alcohol *abuse* is obviously dangerous. Common sense, medical evidence, as well as the Bible, all warn against it. Thus the positions of Norman Geisler, Richard Land, and Barrett Duke perhaps need to be refocused so that they do not condemn alcohol as a forbidden substance for Christians, but rather one that can, if misused, wreak havoc in Christians' lives. Alcohol, like so many things, can become sinful when abused. The same can be said for food, sex, or the Internet. Perhaps conservative Christian scholars who are vehemently anti-alcohol should join with scholars who advocate for moderation. They could perhaps put forth for further study questions like the following for consideration by American evangelicals. One,

should alcohol use be discouraged (but never prohibited) among evangelicals, since a small minority of those who begin using it do indeed become alcoholics? This may be a laudable goal, since the negative effects of alcohol probably outweigh any benefits. Two, what should be the attitude of the churches toward those who have alcohol addictions? Should evangelical churches be more welcoming to those with such problems? Three, should churches pay more attention to those who have been victims of alcoholics (wives battered by alcoholic husbands, for instance)? Four, is alcohol abuse genetic? Should it be considered a physiological problem, as many medical professionals view it, rather than a "sin" issue? Many U.S. churches have of course been addressing all these issues in various ways for years. Still, once American evangelicals admit that alcohol is not sinful in and of itself, they will be able to focus more energy on those whose lives have been harmed by alcohol, without demonizing the majority of Christian drinkers for whom alcohol causes no physical or spiritual problems.

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70 Leonard, "They Have No Wine," 17.