

# SO, IS DRINKING OK?

BY JASON BOYETT



**Question: Which is better? Fishing with one Baptist or two Baptists?**  
**Answer: Two. If you take one, you'll have to share your beer. If you take two, you'll have the beer to yourself, because Baptists won't drink in front of each other.**

I'm not much of a drinker. I didn't drink alcohol at all until I was 22 years old. And these days, I might have little more than the equivalent of two six-packs over the course of a year. A Coors or Shiner Bock when I play poker with my brother's friends. The occasional mixed drink when hanging with

another couple from our church. And should I find myself in the Caribbean, I'm man enough to admit I really like banana coladas—not the virgin ones my wife prefers, but the real thing. And that's pretty much it.

Other confessions: I like to smoke when I go fly-fishing, because campfires are better with

a good cigar, and mountain air is fresher after a cigarette. Furthermore, I play cards, invest in the stock market, let my wife manage our family's finances and used to watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* with devoted regularity.

Next time you're in a church service, fold a paper airplane out of the bulletin, give it a good toss, and chances are you'll hit someone who thinks at least one of the activities above is sinful. Problem is, none of them are expressly prohibited by anything in the Bible, unless you do tricky things with the language or remove things from context. That's one of

the big struggles with being a Christian in a society two millennia removed from the time the last of our Scriptures were written—all the gray areas. Jesus never said, “Disciples, don’t drink alcohol.” He never told any parables about the effects of R-rated movies on His followers. He never chastised the Pharisees for spending too much time playing video games. Of course, He was pretty clear on things like adultery and divorce. And He really got worked up when the religious folks passed judgment on those who didn’t live up to their lengthy lists of societal and religious rules

When Jesus walked around Palestine, the people who most upset Him were the Pharisees. Why? Because they focused on their petty, pseudo-religious rules while losing sight of the important stuff like loving God and loving people. We do the same today. Lots of the “rules” of our comfortable Christian subculture are based more on tradition than the Bible. They have more to do with the notion of “being separate” from the world than being made in the image of Christ. And how

huge cardboard cutout of the band had they known what went on that evening.

That’s all there is to the story. You’re wondering who the band was, aren’t you? Why is that? Is it so you can judge them? Pray for them? Join them? What’s the Christian response to that kind of story?

Let’s leave those questions aside for a bit and just look at some of the issues regarding the Bible and alcohol.

### Grape juice

I attend a Southern Baptist church. I’m not much of a Southern Baptist myself, but that’s a long story, and I won’t get into it. Anyway. Whenever a discussion of alcohol comes up among members of my congregation, and someone mentions the story about Jesus turning water into wine for His first public miracle, one point is inevitably made: that the wine back then was watered down so much it had little or no alcoholic content, making it barely more than grape juice.

That sounds good, and it’s an easy way to

or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (TNIV). Based on the context of this verse, causing a fellow Christian “to fall” means causing him to do something that violates his conscience by imitating an action he believes to be wrong. This is how we usually interpret the scenario: I go to Wal-Mart and grab a six-pack. Bob sees me standing in line with my hands full of Coors. Bob thinks to himself, “Hmm ... I’ve always been taught that drinking beer is sinful, but since Jason’s doing it, I think I’ll give it a try.” And so Bob drinks alcohol, even though he has been taught—and he himself believes—that the action is a sin. Bad for Bob, and bad for me, too.

Abstinence (or, perhaps, sneakiness) makes a lot of sense in this case, but let’s not consider the matter settled yet. There are three specific actions in the verse: 1) Eating meat; 2) Drinking wine; and 3) Doing anything else.

That pretty much covers everything, doesn’t it? And it’s just as clear on meat as it is on wine. Let’s consider our Seventh-Day Adventist brethren, who hold it as a doctrine

## Remember who Jesus kept calling a “brood of vipers”? Here’s a hint—it wasn’t the immoral, the prostitutes, or the drunkards. Nope. It was the churchy people who burdened the above with too many rules.

significant is it that this attitude of separation places great emphasis on some issues of outward appearance (alcohol, smoking, tattoos, entertainment) and not others (unthinking consumerism, gluttony)?

Which brings us to the issue of drinking alcohol. Many readers strongly believe the Bible is clear in its prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Others believe Scripture doesn’t precisely disallow it, but feel it’s best in today’s society to abstain. And there are still others who think there is absolutely nothing wrong with drinking, while recognizing that drunkenness is very much a sinful act.

Some Christians go even further on the issue and don’t condemn drunkenness. A good friend of mine got to spend an evening with the members of a notable hardcore Christian band. After a concert at a local Christian venue, they all proceeded to a local bar and got plastered—the band, their management, the venue’s promoters, everyone. My friend ended up actually escorting the entourage around that evening because she was the only one in any condition to drive. Needless to say, it was a very long, weird night for her. She wondered if her local Christian bookstore would still display their

justify the nearly 50 times wine is mentioned in the Bible as one of God’s blessings. It also helps account for the many times the taking of wine or alcoholic drink is referenced neutrally, as nothing but a common cultural practice. But there are some problems with the “it was only grape juice” argument. How did the communion-takers in Corinth get drunk off of grape juice? Why did the Good Samaritan pour grape juice on the wounds of the assaulted man in Jesus’ parable? Why does Paul warn us not to “be drunk with wine”? Why were the apostles at Pentecost accused of being full of wine when they began speaking in tongues? Is strange behavior usually rationalized because someone’s been sipping the Ocean Spray? Yes, there were several different kinds of wine in the Bible with varying amounts of alcohol—but it was at a sufficient level for drunkenness to be an issue. People got drunk back then just like they do today. My guess is that Bible wine is exactly what it says it is.

### Being a stumbling block

A more reasonable argument against wine is made based on an interpretation of Romans 14:21: “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine

that the eating of meat is wrong. Many believers have problems with SDA doctrine, but among most they are still considered to be a Christian denomination. So do you also think of Romans 14:21 when you pull up at the Burger King drive-thru? When you fire up the backyard grill? When you’re carrying a couple of steaks through the line at the supermarket?

For those who take the Bible seriously, the proper application of the verse becomes a problem. Because in addition to being a teetotaler, you’d better also be a vegetarian.

And we haven’t even touched the “doing anything else” part. Keep in mind that almost anything we do in our current culture has been labeled sinful by some aspect of Christianity. The list includes dancing, wearing makeup, women wearing shorts, listening to rock music, swimming in mixed company or buying anything on a Sunday. The list goes on and on. How do we apply Romans 14:21 consistently without living in constant fear that we’re causing a fellow Christian to stumble? How do we faithfully “avoid the appearance of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22) when evil can be almost anything?

To close out this point, remember this: Jesus greatly offended the Pharisees. He certainly

## Both sides make good points, and both sides are wrong. Why? Because either way the focus is on rules.



spent time with the wrong people, and He drank enough for them to label Him a drunkard (Matthew 11:19). It's pretty clear He did enough to be a stumbling block (1 Corinthians 10:32) to them. After all, they put Him to death. Would that qualify for failing to "avoid the appearance of evil"? Jesus didn't sin, did He?

### Considering our society

It's estimated that there are more than 5 million alcoholics in the U.S. alone, and another 4 million who are considered problem drinkers. The mortality rate is 2.5 times higher among alcoholics than for the general population. Suicide rates are nearly three times higher. Accidental death rates are seven times higher. Up to 40 percent of all traffic fatalities and a third of all traffic injuries are related to the abuse of alcohol. One-third of all suicides and mental health disorders are estimated to be associated with serious alcohol abuse. And that's just among adults—according to Encyclopedia Britannica, there are more than 3 million problem drinkers between the ages of 14 and 17 in the U.S. Clearly, the abuse of alcohol has a devastating effect on our society. It messes people up.

Even if the Bible doesn't condemn wine, wouldn't we be better off in today's culture—where it seems more people are likely to abuse alcohol than to enjoy it responsibly—to forgo it completely? It's a logical argument on the surface, and one that Christians have been using since the days of Prohibition. But there's one problem: It's pretty much moral relativism.

Here's the logic (or illogic): 30 or 40 years ago, our culture as a whole frowned upon things like divorce, adultery and sexual immorality. Why? Because the Bible said they were morally wrong, for one thing. Yet in today's society, people hardly bat an eye about divorce. Everyone's having adulterous and promiscuous sex with everyone else, and homosexuality has entered the mainstream. Our culture accepts these actions, but Christians continue to resist them because we believe the Bible calls them sin. And if

something was a sin 2,000 years ago, it's still sinful now. If Scripture is what we say it is, then you can't eliminate certain parts of it because our society has changed. You can't rewrite the Bible to accommodate today's cultural standards. Sins are moral issues, not cultural ones. Got it?

Now, let's apply that logic to alcohol. If we can't drop sins from the list for cultural reasons, wouldn't it be equally wrong to add them to the list for the same reasons? The opposite of the statement in the paragraph above also applies: If something was not a sin in first-century Palestine, then it can't be a sin now. And isn't making ourselves the definers of sin a little too close to saying we're better than God? At the least, it's legalistic and Pharisaical. Remember who Jesus kept calling a "brood of vipers"? Here's a hint—it wasn't the immoral, the prostitutes or the drunkards. Nope. It was the churchy people who burdened the above with too many rules.

### Judgment and fear

Let's think again about the Christian band with whom my friend spent a saucy evening. What was your immediate reaction to that story? I can think of several possible reactions among readers of *RELEVANT*:

1) Excitement. Who are these guys? I need to know who they are so I can add another celebrity name to my list of Christians who think it's OK to drink.

2) Anger. Who do these guys think they are? Don't they know they're examples to our youth? How irresponsible!

3) Sadness. Why does everything have to be so hard? Why is it so hard to enjoy something without eventually messing it up?

That brings us to the root of the issue. All the arguing about whether or not the Bible says it's OK to drink really ends up saying much more about the arguers than the topic. I get the feeling that many of those who vehemently defend their rights to be Christian drinkers do so because, well, they're nervous about being Christian drinkers. As my sister,

Micha, says, "It seems like we have to speak so loudly about why we're free to smoke and drink because deep down we worry we might be wrong." Same goes for the teetotalers, who argue and quote verses because they're afraid to face the ease with which they pass judgment on their drinking brethren.

Both sides make good points, and both sides are wrong. Why? Because either way the focus is on rules. It's all legalism. Does the Bible say don't drink? Not exactly, so I can drink. Does the Bible say don't drink? Not exactly, so I better not drink.

Here's Micha again, because she says it so well: "It's hard to tell people to be well-balanced—to drink, but not to drink too much. Because drinking screws people up, and how could Jesus have been a part of something that can turn bad so quickly? The truth is, none of us are very good at identifying and following our conscience. It's hard to hear that still, small voice, and even harder to trust it. So we would rather have rules. And don't the rules end up screwing us up just as much in the end?"

So those are the questions we're left with, and there really aren't any good answers. I could write that the Bible doesn't say drinking is a sin (which I believe), but lots of readers will still disagree with me. I could also say that many of the drinkers' arguments are based on their own fear of being wrong (which I also believe), but those readers will disagree with me, too. I could be angry about the Christian band, or I could feel some sort of kinship with them based upon their penchant for alcohol. But mostly I'm just sad, because it's so hard to be like Jesus.

That said, I'll close with two statements I think we all can agree on: Too much drinking does bad things to people. So does too much judgment. 🍷

---

**JASON BOYETT** is the author of *Pocket Guide to Sainthood* and *Pocket Guide to the Afterlife*, among other books. He blogs about faith and culture at [JasonBoyett.com](http://JasonBoyett.com).