

A photograph of a beer mug and a wine glass on a wooden surface. The beer mug is on the left, filled with golden beer and a thick head of foam. The wine glass is on the right, filled with red wine. A small, red devil illustration with horns and a pitchfork is visible inside the wine glass. The background is a textured, brownish wall.

# Does the Devil hide in the bottom of the bottle?

Tim Maguire

**R**ecently a friend made the humorous comment that *it seems whenever a new plant was discovered, humankind's first test on it was to see if it's any good for producing alcohol!*

Unfortunately, fixation on alcohol is a very real problem for many. As Christians we all agree that we should not consume excessive alcohol, but some go to the extreme of saying that the Bible prohibits completely the use of any alcohol. Together, I would like us to look closely at what the Bible really says on this very controversial subject.

According to an article in Christianity Today<sup>1</sup> the Moody Bible Institute recently relaxed a rule for its employees. Full-time employees of MBI are no longer required to totally abstain from tobacco and alcohol. A spokesperson from Moody writes that the change in rules "came out of a desire in Moody's leadership to reflect a high-trust environment that emphasizes values, not rules," and that the Institute wants to "require no more and no less than what God's Word requires."

## OLD TESTAMENT INSTRUCTION

'Wine' translated from the Hebrew word 'yayin' is used over 130 times in the Old Testament.

One of the first times it is mentioned is in Genesis 14:18 where Melchizedek "brought forth bread and wine" for Abram and his companions. The Bible reveals that this same beverage, when used excessively, causes drunkenness. Genesis 9:21 says that Noah drank too much yayin and became drunk.

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*Dear Alcohol, we had a deal-  
you were going to make me  
funnier, sexier, more intelligent  
and a better dancer. I saw the  
video, we need to talk.*

*Anonymous*

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Nevertheless, in Deuteronomy 14:26 God told his people to enjoy yayin at the yearly festivals. In addition to using wine as a beverage, God also commanded the Levitical priests to include in the sacrifices a portion of wine (yayin) as a drink offering (Exodus 29:40). These scriptures make it clear that

there can be a **right** and a **wrong** use of wine.

Naturally fermented wine has an alcohol content of about 10 to 14 percent (higher alcoholic wines are fortified wines). On special occasions God even allowed use of what is translated as “strong drink.” This term comes from a different Hebrew word — *shekar* — which is used 22 times in the Old Testament, and refers to alcoholic drinks made from dates and other fruit.

The high alcoholic drinks called hard liquor today (40 percent to 50 percent alcohol) did not exist in Bible times. They are produced by concentrating the alcohol content through the process of distillation. They did not come into widespread use until the Middle Ages. The danger of these high alcoholic drinks is that, unless one dilutes them, they more easily lend themselves to abuse, drunkenness and alcoholism.

### NEW TESTAMENT INSTRUCTION

John the Baptist did not drink wine (*oinos* in the Greek) or any other form of alcohol because it was prophesied that he wouldn't (Luke 1:15).

However, Jesus Christ did drink *oinos* (wine) (Matthew 11:18, Luke 7:34). Jesus did not preach against the use of wine; instead he did like most other Jews of his day. He drank wine **in moderation**. In ancient times it was normally diluted with water for drinking, and was one of the principal beverages at that time — as it is today.

Jesus' first miracle was to change water into wine (*oinos*).

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*“It's a great advantage not to drink among hard drinking people.”*

*F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby*

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Some people who preach total abstinence claim that this miracle was to turn water into grape juice. Can you imagine a Jewish wedding banquet where everyone drank only grape juice? On this occasion, Christ turned six jars of 20 or 30 gallons each into wine (*oinos*). Jewish weddings in biblical times involved up to a week of feasting. The ancients did not have refrigeration or any other method of preventing grape juice from fermenting, so even if it had started out as just grape juice, the natural fermentation process would have taken place, resulting in wine. But this was no small ‘grape juice miracle’. The wine Jesus miraculously created was of the finest quality — “You have saved the best till now” (John 2:10). At wedding feasts, the hosts normally started with the best wine, and they would bring out lesser-quality wines later when the good wine had had an **effect** on the partiers, and they would be less likely to know the difference.

Jesus also gave a parable involving the fermenting process of *oinos* in Matthew 9:17. At that time, instead of having glass bottles to enclose wine, the skins of animals were used. The fermentation of the wine releases carbon dioxide (a gas) which

would build up pressure and could burst an old skin, but it would not break a new stretchable skin.

Another proof that *oinos* is fermented wine is the fact that the apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:18, “Do not get drunk on wine [*oinos*]”. Paul did not mean to avoid getting drunk on grape juice! Paul instructed Timothy, “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine [*oinos*] because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Timothy 5:23). He said to use only a **little** wine, not a lot. The purpose of this wine was Timothy's frequent stomach ailments; small amounts of wine have been known to help some stomach problems.

### THE BIBLE WARNS AGAINST AND PROHIBITS EXCESSIVE USE

Both the Old and New Testaments contain many examples and commands against excessive use of alcohol and drunkenness. Drunkenness is listed as one of the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:21). That means it is the result of the undisciplined and indiscriminate use of alcohol. Jesus warned his followers not to be drunk (Luke 21:34).

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*“Drink because you are happy, but never because you are miserable.”*

*G.K. Chesterton, Heretics*

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No one who abuses alcohol should be ordained in the ministry of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 3:3, 8 Titus 1:7). If a minister drinks, it should be in moderation.

Throughout the Bible, God criticizes those who are “heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks” (Isaiah 5:22). When used improperly, wine is a “mockery and deceiver” (Proverbs 20:1). Those who “linger over wine” and spend a great deal of time in drinking will find all kinds of woe, sorrow and trouble (Proverbs 23:29-30).

### BIBLE ALLOWS MODERATE USE

Prohibitionists focus on the verses that condemn or show the results of **wrong** alcohol use, but neglect those verses that show there can be a proper moderate use. The Bible says that God gave wine to make men glad (Psalm 104:15). Unfortunately some people have turned this blessing of God into a curse, yet to say that no one should ever do it would be to say something different than what Scripture is saying.

So then, is the Devil found in the bottom of a bottle? Possibly, but if you don't finish the bottle in one sitting, he will probably leave before you get there! 

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1. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/december/why-so-many-christians-are-relaxing-over-drinks.html?start=1>

**Some people however, have serious problems with alcohol, and need professional assistance. A trustworthy source of help is Alcoholics Anonymous [www.aasouthafrica.org.za](http://www.aasouthafrica.org.za).**