

# ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΟΥ

## “In the Nick of Time”

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Occasional Essays  
and Other Stuff  
for Christian Students

Presented by the  
President of

Central Baptist  
Theological Seminary  
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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April 22, 2005

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## Thoughts on Drinking Alcohol

### Getting the Question Right

Recently, I've been following a perfectly inane conversation on a fundamentalist blog. The discussion deals with the question of whether the consumption of alcohol by Christians is a sin. Several aspects of the discussion are troubling, but none is more disturbing than the apparent inability of these bloggers to frame the question carefully. This is a significant problem: asking the right question does not guarantee that you'll get the right answer, but asking the wrong question makes a wrong answer virtually certain. Therefore, what I propose to do in this essay is to suggest considerations for framing the question properly.

To begin with, I suggest that the question should not be about the consumption of alcohol *per se*. If we are not allowed to consume *any* alcohol, then we are going to have to dispense with many substances that we take for granted. Some degree of fermentation occurs naturally in a variety of foods and beverages. We might go to a picnic and drink fruit juice that has been sitting out a bit too long; consequently, we shall consume a small quantity of alcohol. I doubt that anyone has a problem with this, for the simple reason that the quantity of alcohol is so negligible that it does not constitute a significant ingredient of the beverage.

More than that, alcohol is an element in a number of products that are not normally consumed but that do leave an alcoholic residue. When we use an alcohol-based mouthwash, we do not intend to swallow the product. Still, a certain amount of it remains in our mouth after we spit it out, and we do in fact ingest minute quantities of alcohol. Or perhaps we eat a

piece of cake, the frosting on which contains vanilla extract. Once again, we are consuming alcohol. In all the above cases, however, the quantities are so minute as to be negligible. I know of no one who seriously objects to the consumption of such quantities of alcohol under such conditions.

If the debate is not over the consumption of alcohol *per se*, then what is it about? It is about intoxicating substances. You would vomit before you could eat enough vanilla frosting to become intoxicated. Vanilla frosting is not an intoxicating substance under normal circumstances. On the other hand, Everclear (200 proof) is a *highly* intoxicating drink. Even though it has a fairly high percentage of alcohol, Listerine is not an inebriating substance. It contains other ingredients that would make it difficult or impossible to drink. Beer and wine, however, are definitely intoxicating substances.

If we want to discuss the morality of alcohol meaningfully, then we must frame the question in terms of intoxicating drinks. This specification moves us in the right direction, but it still does not clear up all of the problems. Hence, I submit another suggestion, namely, that the debate is not about *every* use of intoxicating drinks, but only about the use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage.

This distinction is important. We regularly recognize that a thing may have special uses even if it is generally forbidden. Few of the most avid Christian libertarians are prepared to advocate the recreational use of opiates, and yet we feel justified in employing opiates under certain circumstances. I suggest that intoxicating drinks have three uses that are not really part of the question that we want to answer.

First, intoxicating drinks have anesthetic uses. They serve the purpose, sometimes useful and justified, of dulling pain. Something like this seems to be implied by Proverbs 31:6. I should note that many commentators believe that this verse is an instance of irony (a figure of speech in which one states the opposite of what one means). I think it is better to take it literally. A dying man who is suffering may experience relief from his agony through the pain-dulling properties of intoxicating drinks. Such a use is merciful and justified.

Second, intoxicating drinks also have antiseptic uses. Every experienced backpacker knows not to drink untreated water. When we go hiking through the wilderness, we carry either chlorine or iodine tablets. We mix small quantities of these with the water in order to kill the microscopic organisms that could make us quite ill. Chlorine and iodine are poisons, and we would never advocate their use as beverages. But their use as germicides is both acceptable and necessary under some circumstances.

Of course, the ancients had no chlorine or iodine tablets. What they did have was wine, and wine when fermented could contain enough alcohol to serve the same purpose. Mixed with water, it could make the water drinkable. The mix of wine and water could still be called *wine*, although the quantity of alcohol might be so minuscule as to remove the resulting beverage from the list of intoxicating substances. My point is simply that wine, mixed as a purifier with water, is in a different category from wine consumed whole as a beverage. I don't think that any reasonable person could object to adding enough alcohol to kill the typhoid and cholera in one's drinking water.

Third, intoxicating drinks may also have allopathic uses. This parallels the use of narcotics as medicines. If we don't object to using narcotics medicinally, we really have no reason to object to ingesting intoxicating beverages medicinally. Thus, when Paul (probably writing with the physician Luke at his elbow) tells Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach's sake, we register no objection (even supposing that the wine Paul intended was capable of intoxicating). A medicinal use is not the same as a recreational use.

This medicinal use, however, must be distinguished from the putative "health benefits" of some alcoholic drinks. Taking a dosed substance to treat a specific affliction is simply not the same thing as consuming the substance recreationally in the hopes of gaining some questionable improvement to one's health in the long run. Therefore, this qualification must be limited to restricted medical applications of intoxicating drinks.

This puts us in a position to formulate a more specific and manageable question regarding the morality of alcohol. It looks something like this: "Does the Bible permit us to consume intoxicating drinks as beverages?" If we are to debate the morality of alcohol in a coherent fashion, the question needs to be nuanced in these ways, and perhaps in other ways as well. If we were to restrict our conversation carefully to this question, a good bit of pointless verbiage could be eliminated. ✕

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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