

“Finding Nepho: A White Paper on the subject of “Christians and Alcohol.” By Cere Muscarella

Yes, it's a shameless reference to the Disney movie, “Finding Nemo!” The relevance of the parallel is that Nemo is a story about love; lost – and the arduous, often confusing, quest to find it again! “Finding Nepho” is also a story of love lost in the Body of Christ and the often arduous quest to find it when it comes to the topic of alcohol drinking Christians. What's missing in the polarized debate is love for one another, for the worldly people watching us, for God's Word and the sacrifice of His Son. It's simply not easy to navigate through the seemingly solid arguments on both sides of the issue to find the truth!

Who ya' gonna turn to?

On one side of the argument are believers that feel like it's okay to drink. On the other side are those who think of alcohol as the devils' brew. One side says there's nothing wrong with Christians who drink if they do it responsibly. The other side just shakes their fingers, turn up their noses and then turn their backs on those who imbibe any sort of alcohol. One side is “liberated” the other “disciplined”! Both sides of the argument are put forward by some of the most genuine, likeable, credible, people... Some of them very influential and well respected Bible teachers. So who do we believe? Do we have to believe anything? Should it even be an issue? Isn't it a matter of personal taste? Is it just another distraction?

A pro, running a con!

Someone said well that for Christians every pro and con list is just the set-up to being conned by a pro. But to get to the heart of the matter we first have to deal with the existing “pro's and con's” of the arguing sides without taking sides.

On the “pro” side, we have arguments spanning societal/cultural habits, Jesus and His disciples' use of wine in Holy Writ, and things as worthy as medical studies promoting the benefits of a drink a day, “for thy stomach's sake.”

Many of the “pros” argue varied points of type, quality and quantity of drinks. Some go as far as to argue degrees of inebriation where drunkenness is always wrong, a buzz is okay and a dinner drink is completely acceptable – even necessary in some social circles.

The real Christian “pros” cite the “influences of Egypt” as the argument against the consumption of beer and distilled liquor but the “culture of the Bible” as the argument for the Christian use of wine. Then there's the grand-daddy of the pro-drink arguments: “And what did Jesus turn the water into?”

On the “con” side you have some very fuzzy arguments about new and fermented grape juice, the early cultures' lack of water quality, their struggle against killer amoebas, their simple lifestyles and tranquil minds versus our complex and aggressive days, and almost always a story of how alcohol use killed someone dear, or near.... What is very clear is their passion, the easily defeated Bible scholarship, the often graceless Bible thumping, and in many cases, condemnation followed by separation.

Flying high over all the debating is the one “Pro” intoxicated by the “con”! He's the master of discord and lovelessness. He feeds on strife. He is the one that Jesus identified and personified as the devil, who loves seeing the body of Christ dissipated, distracted and even destroyed, most satisfyingly, from within. Every once in a while he injects a slanderous sound byte to keep things stirred up, but there's not a lot for him to do. We wreak havoc all by ourselves. He sits back getting higher and higher on the fumes of our unresolved debate and our dissipation.

If you want to find “permission” to use alcohol, you can! Self justification runs deep in the human heart and in some Christian circles. If you want to be ugly about the issue, you can be! But the wrath of man never works the righteousness of God, nor is gracelessness one of His traits.

There is an answer to the debate, but it doesn't come from human reasoning. It can only be found in the “Wisdom from above, *not earthly or sensual!*” The sons and daughters of God are called to be led by the Spirit

of God, not reasonable sounding arguments, not the net results of pro-and-con lists, just simply the Word of God!

The Old Testament version of “Nepho”

“It is not for kings to drink wine; nor for prince’s strong drink: Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of the afflicted. Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that are of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.” Proverbs 31:4-7

The book of Proverbs has been waiting for centuries to be *heard* on this particular subject. Modern Christians who revel in being made “kings and priests,” and “kings of the King” should give pause on the Old Testament writer’s cry: “It is not for kings to drink; nor for prince’s strong drink!” Notice the double injunction for emphasis.

The writer says that those who are advocates in places of power and influence, those who are social trend setters, those who are empowered movers and shakers, those who are called to the daily discharge of godly duties are not to drink wine or strong drink because it brings them to excess. What is the excess? Forgetfulness of God’s word and the perversion of discernment! *Intemperance in a leader/king/priest can have very negative affects on a whole community!*

According to this old holy writ, the use of intoxicants should be reserved as an anesthetic shot for the careless, sick, dying, depressed and hopeless. That should be enough to settle the argument for any sharp minded, serious, God chasing believer, but there’s a much stronger argument...

The New Testament Confrontations

Unlike John the Baptist’s asceticism, hindering the lifestyles of the rich and famous, Jesus came “eating and drinking” (Luke 7:33, 34). The same people who criticized John saying he had a devil called Jesus “a gluttonous man, a winebibber and friend to publicans and sinners.” John was modeling for sin-full, intemperate men – holiness via abstinence. Jesus came tempted and tested in all points like us yet temperate and holy in all things – proving that the problem with the “eating and drinking” wasn’t the dietary solids and fluids but the fluid morality and less than solid commitment of the imbibers!

Jesus the King stands as a perfect model of a man of God, enjoying all the things God has given us, never abusing them nor forgetting His calling and accountability. Jesus was, and remains, a sharp contrast to uncommitted, intemperate, out of focus mankind who find it almost impossible to stay in balance in anything! He is the perfect example of what life could be like, should be like, while at the same time proving that certain restrictions keep us from falling, or causing others to fall, by unrestricted liberties.

By the time the church had moved too far down the road it became evident to the disciples that the pursuit of holiness, healthiness and wholeness was not going to be pursued with enough intentionality to protect both disciple and spectator. It became apparent that the injunction must be placed on this issue of Christians and drinking and that the disciple must willing to give up anything for the sake of kingdom work.

The New Testament injunction against the church drinking is not an ascetic’s delight – it is a double warning against our falling into sin or being hung with a millstone for causing weaker brothers to stumble!

Paul is speaking to people who want to emerge from ordinary, many-options-little-of-God Christianity to become fruit bearing sons and daughters that glorify His name and magnify His grace.

“And an overseer (*who it must be understood, is just a person standing taller from the crowd, no special anointing, no special appointment, just a “stretching-upward desire”*) must be blameless, harnessed, **nephalios**, sound minded, orderly, fond of hosting people, able to teach, **not paroinos...**” 1Tim 3:2ff

Nephalios comes from the root Nepho: to abstain from wine. (Now, abstinence from *sex*, as we tell it to our kids, does not mean, “*a little with dinner... Sometimes at parties... Okay when the rest of our friends are doing it... Not more than I can handle.*” Abstinence from sex means “*no sex!*” Abstinence from wine, unless you have one of those special write-as-you-go, self-gratifying Bible concordances, means nothing less!)

Paul reiterates the standard for these emergent people with “not paroinos:” “not with wine,” “not even near wine,” “*no* tipping!” Notice again, the double injunction for emphasis.

This sounds a bit too ascetic for some Christians, especially those of us who live in these times of grace and liberty... but it is the New Testament Word of God nonetheless... heard and heeded by people who want to reach up and stand out!

Before long it became apparent that the presence and use of wine was one of those “liberties,” not well handled, causing others to stumble. Paul the lover of the church and the Spirit-tuned penman of much of the New Testament tenets, issues this God-breathed injunction for evolving, emerging believers. Of course, there was no abandoning us to tasteless, joyless living... he also penned,

“...and don’t be intoxicated with wine, wherein is excess, but be crammed full and overflowing with the Spirit of God.” Ephesians 5:18

Here Paul offers the N.T. believer the jolt, the buzz, the high, the set-my-feet dancing supernatural Liberator that replaces the lowly, natural libation of the vine... without fear of excess... or “hangover!”

As jugs wet with this “new wine” we now have more than an anesthetic shot to offer the hopeless, infirm, confused, heavy-hearted, etc... We have the intoxicating, invigorating, life giving good news that Jesus has come to heal all of our sicknesses and dis—eases!

No contradiction, just a prescription!

It’s the final mantra of the pro-Christian drinking defense, “Paul said, ‘and use a little wine for thy stomach’s sake.’” Much to the chagrin of libertarian-legalists, Paul’s instruction to Timothy actually loosens, not strengthens, the grip on the bottle.

Paul echoes the OT description of one of the proper uses of wine, for sickness and he writes a minor, measured, prescription for Timothy’s sick stomach. However, Paul would have a natural expectation that Timothy, along with believers of all times, would contend for the healing benefits of the faith, of the cross, and no longer have a need for those small doses of “medicine.”

Christians should carry no brief against the proper use of medicines. Without the knowledge that God has given the body sciences, most – if not all – Christians would be dead already! Medicines are a great aid in the relief of faith stealing symptoms of sickness, disease and pain. Relieved, however, we should always fight the good fight of faith for the “sozo” life given us at the cross for our salvation and healing!

Though Nepho calls any serious believer to stand away from the use of alcoholic beverages... it does not follow that we should feel the need to restrict the temporary use of medications that contain small amounts of alcohol as elixirs. There is no real need to flush the Nyquil along with the Johnnie Walker or Bud Light. One, it could be argued, gives us temporary relief from the symptoms of stuffy head... while the others stuff up our heads (Proverbs 31) with compromises that can affect us for a lifetime!”

What to do?

The principle of “Nepho” can be completely ignored... but it can’t be set aside. If a person wants to drink, likes to drink, thinks it enhances the quality of life, “let them drink.” Of course it would be worth the time for them to read 1Corinthians 14:38 and Romans 1:21ff first. Our Father has a history of speaking His desire and then letting it bless the hearers by obedience – or curse them by disobedience.

What would be as refreshing as a good stiff drink would be a pro-drinking believer who just stepped up to the plate and said, "I am going to drink what I want, when I want, just because I want to!" Why do believers work so hard to make a biblical case for doing "what is not of faith?" To save face?

Simply put, "Nepho is faith rising to new levels. Drinking is faith-sinking."

So what do we do with Nepho once he's been found? We ignore him, sicken ourselves with self-rule, anesthetizing ourselves more with each drink... or we align with him and look forward to the day when we will drink wine anew with another temporary abstainer, Jesus...

The Truth from above!

"I will not drink henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." Matthew 26:29

What a promise... and the premiere reason to abstain! Here Jesus alludes to the great marriage supper of the Lamb! He tells us He won't be hefting the cup again until we all gather together there in the next age for a time of celebration! It will be when our work is over and the faithful are gathered.

Nepho isn't a prudish curse foisted by legalistic Bible interpreters. It's a New Testament, current-to-this-day, livable restriction that comes with a promise! For those stretching upward; willing to stand, live and die on His Word, to give up rights for the loving sake of the weaker, to work soberly right down to the end, Jesus has reserved the joy of a virginal toast! Together in heaven with Jesus, we will party with glasses lifted high in the posture of the victorious!

The banquet and drinks, the stories, cheers and toasts are ahead in a fashion none of us can actually imagine... But now is the time for "kings," "priests" and "emerging believers" to get focused and be "at work!" Right now we need clear heads, strong bodies and a solid hold on the Word, to accomplish the work God has given us.

"...it is high time to awaken out of our sleep: for now our final deliverance is closer than when we first believed. The night is almost over; the day is at hand so let us cast off all darkness and clothe ourselves in the armor of light. In plain sight of all let us walk decently; not loosening our grip, not getting drunk, not being involved in sexual misconduct, not living in competition with others and steering clear of heated debates. Let's put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision to fulfill the lusts of our flesh." Romans 13:11-14

"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep, sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation." 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8

So king... priest... New Testament believer, Nepho is ready to come home! Are you pro? Con? Or God sided?