

The Inscrutable Question: The Problem of Overindulgence in Wine in the Ephesian Church, Eph 5:18a

Ephesians 5:18 - [NASV] And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit.

- 1) There are quite a number of ways in which the believer can flout time. Let's note the few we have covered thus far: (1) Status quo carnality: personal sin, loss of the filling of the Holy Spirit, and failure to rebound; this is grieving the Holy Spirit; (2) Christian degeneracy: prolonged carnality resulting in moral or immoral behavior and the production of human good and evil; this is quenching the Holy Spirit; and (3) walking as a fool: the general description of a carnal believer's lifestyle; this ultimately results in lying to the Holy Spirit.
- 2) Apparently there was one more problem among the believers in Ephesus. The immorally degenerate were involved in excessive drinking and the morally degenerate were bad to talk about it.
- 3) This behavior problem provides Paul with a wonderful opportunity to make a pun to help teach the central doctrine of the Christian way of life that is key to redeeming time. The verse begins with the present passive imperative of the verb:

μεθύσκω / methusko / - "to become intoxicated; to be drunk; to be inebriated."

- 4) There is probably no other concept in the English language that has so many synonyms to describe it. Here are a few of the more descriptive ones and you can take your pick of which communicates the idea best to you. These are selected from:

Stephen Glazer. *Random House Word Menu*. (New York: Random House, 1992), 795-96:

besotted, bibulous, blasted, blotto, bombed, cockeyed, crapulous, crocked, dissipated, fried, lit-up, loaded, pickled, pie-eyed, plastered, polluted, potted, ripped, shnockered, sloshed, smashed, soaked, soused, squiffed, stewed, stoned, swacked, tanked, tight, wasted, wiped-out, and zonked.

Those who engage in drinking sprees are said to be on a bender, a binge, a brannigan, or a toot.

Those who are involved in overindulging in alcoholic beverages are referred to as a bibber, a boozier, a drunkard, a hooch hound, a lush, a rummy, a sot, a tippler, a tosspot, or a wino.

In the South the widely used name to describe the quintessential small-town drunk is Cooter Brown. Therefore, when someone overindulges it causes him to be as drunk as Cooter Brown.

- 5) Therefore, one of the problems with the immoral degenerates in the Ephesian church is that many were rummies who went on drinking sprees until they were drunk as Cooter Brown.
- 6) The verb **μεθύσκω / methusko** / is related to the bacchic frenzy of the Dionysian cult of the ancient world. Dionysus is the Greek god of wine and ecstasy. Bacchus was the Romans' equivalent mythological deity.

present: Descriptive progressive; signifies action in a state of progress which means that many of the believers in Ephesus were drunkards. It describes what was actually taking place at the time Paul writes.

passive: Crapulous Christians receive the action of the verb, that is, they are being acted upon by the excessive amount of alcohol ingested resulting in intoxication. They are drunk as Ephesus' Cooter Brown.

imperative: Prohibition; the negative particle **μή / me** / gives us the translation “Stop being intoxicated.”
 With what they are not to become intoxicated is stated next by the noun:

οἶνος / oinos / - “wine”

- 7) Wine was the favorite alcoholic beverage in the city of Ephesus at the time of Paul’s writing although beer was also popular.
- 8) The concept of alcohol abuse was not unknown to the ancient world, especially when it became associated with the popular religious cults that are prevalent in any age of history.
- 9) The Greek language had developed a vocabulary for the problem and all are referenced in the Greek New Testament. We will note three:
 1. **μέθυσος / methusos /:** (adjective) “drunkard”; often involved in an addiction to other vices as is indicated in:

1 Corinthians 5:11 - But now I write to you not to associate with any believer, if he should be an immoral person or covetous [**the entire lust pattern**] or an idolater or an abusive person [**a bully**] or a drunkard [**μέθυσος / methusos /**] or a swindler. Do not even eat with them.

2. **μέθη / methe /:** (noun) “drunkenness; habitual intoxication”; connotes the believer who is constantly involved in submitting to the desires of the lust pattern at the expense of execution of the Christian way of life.

Romans 13:13 - Let us conduct our lives in what is appropriate for the day time, not in lascivious parties or in drunkenness [**μέθη / methe /**], or in extra-marital intercourse, in unrestrained promiscuity, nor in altercations based on self-interest or jealousy.

v. 14 - On the contrary, invest yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and stop giving forethought to the sinful nature with a view to its craving.

The mandate “invest yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” makes reference to the redemption of time, its investment in the double-column advance, and the end result of the light of Christ shining on the believer.

Too often we submit to the temptations of the sinful nature, enjoy the romp, and then rebound. We are to stop this kind of behavior and concentrate on living the spiritual life.

3. **μεθύω / methuo /:** (verb) “to be drunk with wine; to be intoxicated”; this verb is the root word and is taken from another Greek word for wine, **μέθυ / methu /**. It also has other meanings that include, metaphorically “to be drenched or steeped in any liquid; stupefied; stunned.”

Μεθύω / methuo / is used to describe a problem in the Corinthian church where members were partaking of the Eucharist service while intoxicated with wine.

1 Corinthians 11:20 - When you meet together it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper,

v. 21 - for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk [**μεθύω / methuo /**].

- 10) Ephesians 5:18 begins with the prohibitive mandate, “Stop being intoxicated with wine.” The question arises as to how restrictive this mandate is. Does it condemn the consumption of alcoholic beverages altogether or does it seek to restrict overindulgence?
- 11) The Bible prohibits through negative mandate the imbibing of alcoholic beverages to the point of drunkenness, intoxication, and inebriation and those who do are guilty of sin.

- 12) The sin of intoxication is a part of immoral degeneracy and is committed by both the believer as well as the unbeliever. Some passages that indicate the problem, its symptoms, and the ramifications follow:

Proverbs 20:1 - Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is intoxicated by it is not wise.

Proverbs 23:29 - Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaining? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes?

v. 30 - Those who linger long over wine, those who go to taste mixed wine.

v. 32 - At the last it bites like a serpent and stings like a viper.

v. 33 - Your eyes will see strange things and your mind will utter perverse things.

v. 34 - And you will be like one who lies down in the middle of the sea or like one who lies down on the tip of the mast.

Proverbs 23:35b - "When shall I awake? I will seek another drink."

Isaiah 5:11 - Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink, who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them!

v. 12 - And their banquets are accompanied by lyre and harp, by tambourine and flute, and by wine. But they do not pay attention to the deeds of the lord nor do they consider the work of His hands.

v. 22 - Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant men in mixing strong drink.

- 13) However, these passages do not forbid the consumption of alcoholic beverages, in fact there are passages that recommend it.

Psalms 104:14 - He causes the grass to grow for the cattle and vegetation for the labor of man so that he may bring forth food from the earth.

v. 15 - and wine which makes man's heart glad.

Proverbs 31:6 - Give strong drink to him who is perishing and wine to him whose life is bitter.

v. 7 - Let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his trouble no more.

1 Timothy 5:23 - No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.

- 14) The issue in Ephesus was not just overindulgence. Believers there were involved in an habitual abuse of strong drink and had become habitual drunkards. We learn this from what comes next in verse 18 in the prepositional phrase:

ἐν ᾧ / **en hos** / plus the present active indicative of the verb:

εἰμί / **eimi** / - “by which is”

present: Pictorial; indicates that which is now going on. It presents to the mind a picture of the events as in process of occurrence. The problem of Christian immoral degeneracy in the form of habitual drunkenness is currently going on.

active: Believers in the Ephesian church are producing the action by being winos.

indicative: Declarative; a statement of fact.