

**NAZARITES AND ALCOHOL**  
Numbers 6:2-11, Mark 14:23-25  
By Raymond White

Many Christian denominations do not imbibe; that is, they do not drink alcohol in any form. Among these are Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, Southern Baptists and a host of others. But Biblically, this is not a trivial issue, not in the sense of “Christians don’t because the Bible says don’t.” The problem is the Bible doesn’t say “don’t.”

**[1] JESUS AND ALCOHOL**

It is certain, for instance, that Jesus drank wine. We know that because the Bible says so. It is just as certain that Jesus did not sin because, again, the Bible says so. So it is not possible that imbibing is in itself a sin.

But the Bible wants to have it both ways. It commands some people to not imbibe and expressly allows others to imbibe.

***Proverbs 31:4** It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink: **:5** Lest they drink, and forget the law, and pervert the judgment of any of the afflicted. **:6** Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. **:7** Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.*

The sin described here is not drinking but drinking to the point of perverting judgment. People in positions of responsibility must perform their duties responsibly and being drunk certainly impedes capability.

Jesus did drink wine but he was not an alcoholic. He even defended himself from just that accusation.

***Matthew 11:18** For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil **:19** The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.*

Jesus was complaining that his opponents were never satisfied no matter what. John didn’t drink alcohol and he fasted a lot and they said he was crazy. Only a crazy person would live like that. But Jesus, on the other hand, enjoyed good wine and fine food along with everyone else and they accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard.

This expression “wisdom is justified of her children” is, I think, an ancient version of “stupid is as stupid does.” You can see wisdom, or the lack of wisdom, from its results, her “children.” He means, I think, look at how ridiculous their demands are. Are they accusing me of being a drunk? Do they see me rolling around drunk? In other words: use your eyes, you can see that I’m no abuser. Or simply put, use common sense.

The point is: Jesus drank wine but he was no drunk and their accusation was without merit.

But since he did drink wine, how do we non-imbibing Christians defend ourselves against the charge that we are too puritanical with our non-imbibing?

## [2] THE NAZARITE VOW

I want to offer a new and novel argument for non-imbibing, if we need one. My argument is the notion of the Nazarite vow.

Nazarites (Hebrew: נַזִּיר, **nazir**) took a vow to not drink wine. I am pointing out that Mormons and other non-imbibing Christians take a similar vow to not drink wine or any alcohol. Mormon baptism for example includes a commitment to live the Word of Wisdom which is a vow to not imbibe among other things. That makes Mormons and other non-imbibing Christians something like Nazarites.

Here is the Nazarite text.

*Numbers 6:2 ...When either a man or a woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazarite, to separate themselves unto the LORD: :3 He shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no vinegar of wine, or vinegar of strong drink, neither shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. :5 All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the LORD, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of his hair grow. :6 All the days that he separateth himself unto the LORD he shall come at no dead body. :8 All the days of his separation he is holy unto the LORD. :9 And if any man die very suddenly by him, and he hath defiled... :10 ...he shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons, to the priest... :11 And the priest shall offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering, and make an atonement for him...*

So, there are three things that separate a Nazarite: (1) no alcohol, (2) no hair cutting, and (3) no touching a corpse just as a priest can't touch a corpse. Further, this separated condition is sometimes temporary and sometimes permanent depending on the intent of the initiate. And finally, if the Nazarite is defiled, he must make a sin offering.

This last point is seen as a contradiction which the ancients discussed in, for example, the Talmud. How can someone who is separated/holy be defiled?

A similar contradiction persists in Christianity today: How can a born-again Christian ("saved" in evangelical terms) sin? And yet clearly they/we do. This tension gives many Christians, who know they are not perfect and will never be in this life, an uneasy sense of "I'll never be good enough."

This is not a modern dilemma. It was discussed by the ancients (in the Talmud) and is as ancient a problem as the righteous Abel who offered sacrifice for his sins.

How can that be? How can a righteous man make a sin offering? But Abel did.

*Hebrews 11:4 By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.*

The way to deal with this dilemma is simply to respect both sides of the tension and do these two things: (1) Be righteous like Abel, and (2) sacrifice for sins as Abel.

Are those two things a contradiction? Yes they are, but those are the two things the Bible demands of us: be as righteous as you can, and trust God to forgive.

This is the reason, I think, that Jesus washed his disciples' feet at the last supper. Peter countered with something like, "Well, then, maybe I should take a bath." Then Jesus countered with, "You don't need a bath, you're already clean. You just need the dirt knocked off your feet now and then after walking through the dirty streets." That is a picture of the Christian walk through life — cleansed once (baptism, conversion, born again), but still picking up a little dirt here and there that needs to be knocked off now and then (sacrament, Eucharist, daily repentance).

I am not claiming that modern Christians are Nazarites in the full sense — (for a Christian to never cut his hair would seem a very un-Christian like, although there was one famous Mormon who took that extreme quite literally: Orin Porter Rockwell). I am only making the connection that we non-imbibing Christians stand on firm biblical ground to point at the Nazarites and say, "Us too. We have made vows like that."

### [3] THE NAZARENE

So the idea of a Nazarite goes all the way back to Moses the author of Numbers. Then centuries later a town was born called Nazareth. And finally from that town of Nazareth came a Nazarene who was by his nature separated from sin and uniquely qualified to save the world: Jesus Christ of Nazareth, he who was Holy unto the Lord.

Jesus was not a Nazarite. But in a sense he was a Nazarite, in the sense that he was already holy. And this label, Nazarene, which attached to him because of his place of origin, was a providential play on words with a double meaning, which identified him not only a man from Nazareth but also as a separated holy man.

Soon after that, one of his disciples, Paul, was accused of being —

*Acts 24:5 ...a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes.*

So Jesus' followers embraced the label *Nazarenes* and its double meaning. That is: we follow that holy man, that Nazarite from Nazareth.

### [4] JESUS' NAZARITE VOW

There are three named Nazarites in the Bible: Sampson, Samuel, and John the Baptist. True, Jesus was not one of them, however, he appears to have taken something like a Nazarite vow on the occasion of the Last Supper.

*Mark 14:23 And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them: and they all drank of it. :24 And he said unto them, This is my blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many. :25 Verily, I say unto you, I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until that day I drink it new in the kingdom of God.*

*Luke 22:17* And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: *:18* For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come.

And now we arrive at the thrust of my “Nazarite” argument. Yes, Jesus drank wine. But at the end of his life at the Last Supper, Jesus took a sort of Nazarite vow, and obligated himself to it (no more wine) through the rest of his life (which was short) until he returned with his kingdom. At that moment, that new vow made him a Nazarite.

### [5] OUR NAZARITE VOW

So if you need a biblical reason to not imbibe when nearly everyone in the bible seems to be imbibing, now you have one. If you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus the Nazarene who made a vow to not imbibe, then it is reasonable to submit yourself to his vow to drink no more of the fruit of the vine (meaning wine) until he returns with his kingdom. If you consider yourself obligated to his final vow, then you are an official non-imbiber, a Nazarite.

If you consider yourself a Nazarite, and live by that Nazarite covenant that Jesus took at his last supper, and make your own non-imbibing covenant, you’ll be better off for it. You’ll be healthier, your liver will last longer, if you’re a pregnant woman your baby will be healthier, and you will run no risk of ever becoming an alcoholic as 10% of all social imbibers become. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose by living a Nazarite, non-imbibing life.

So, what’s the point of a Nazarite or holy life? Holy means separate, apart. And what does that mean? A holy life is an “apart” life, distinct from everyone else, as is holy matrimony meaning conjugally together and apart from everyone else. To not drink alcohol is to live an apart life, setting aside something that everyone else does.

On the front of the Los Angeles Mormon Temple appear these words: “Holy to the Lord.” Well, wouldn’t you expect a people who claim to be a holy people, an apart people to live an apart life? And indeed, that is exactly what Mormons and Adventists and others do, live an apart life by not ingesting alcohol, tobacco, or any other substance that is deemed to be unhealthful. After all, Jesus did say —

*John 10:10* ... I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

One way we can take him at his word to have more life and live it more abundantly is to avoid the problems of alcohol by not imbibing. Hey, anything that promises to extend and improve my life, I’m all for it.