

2 Questions: [1] Is it a sin to drink alcohol? [2] Should total abstinence be a requirement for church membership?

Why is this worthy of discussion?

ANS: Because in this room there are Bible believing, God fearing brothers & sisters who believe alcohol is a gift from God requiring moderation and other Bible believing, God fearing brothers and sisters who sincerely believe that it is a sin for Christians to drink alcohol in any form other than medicinally.

AND we have a church constitution that takes the 2nd position.

For the sake of unity, brotherly love, and not causing offense, we need to have this conversation.

This question is not new and we are not the only ones asking it. Christians have been debating this question for decades and many churches are changing the wording of their church covenants to the typical pre-prohibition era form which did not include the words, *We also engage... to abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drink as a beverage....*

Before we answer the question, let me say this: For Christians, or ANYONE to be cavalier about alcohol, makes no sense at all!

Centers for Disease Control

- There are approximately 88,000 deaths attributable to excessive alcohol use each year in the United States.
- 3rd leading lifestyle-related cause of death for the nation.
- 1/3 of traffic fatalities are related to excessive alcohol consumption.
- Excessive alcohol use is responsible for 2.5 million years of potential life lost (YPLL) annually, or an average of about 30 years of potential life lost for each death.
- In 2006, there were more than 1.2 million emergency room visits and 2.7 million physician office visits due to excessive drinking.
- The economic costs of excessive alcohol consumption in 2006 were estimated at \$223.5 billion.

These statistics do NOT reflect the devastating effects of wrecked marriages, child abuse, sex crimes, brawling, job losses and people making babbling fools of themselves! However, not one of those statistics is the result of a man or woman having a beer with their lunch or a glass of wine with their evening meal. The issue is not a substance but the abuse of a substance.

The Bible is cautious about it. The cultural effects are often devastating. It is addictive. Therefore I personally find little incentive to use it. I probably did not reach this conclusion on my own. It is part of the rich heritage I derive from my fundamentalist upbringing. Many of my generation are in a rush to throw over points of separation they heard preached and taught growing up. Granted, some of them cannot be warranted as biblical decrees: The Bible does not say: *Thou shalt not drink alcohol... Thou shalt not go to movies... Thou shalt not smoke cigarettes or chew tobacco... Thou shalt not dance....* But nearly every one of these statements, when offered as admonitions, provide guidance for youth seeking to walk in the way of wisdom. But what man or woman went through life avoiding all of these things and lived to regret it?

The Bible has a great deal to say about the use and abuse of wine.

There are a number of warnings concerning wine & strong drink.

Eph 5:18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

Rms 14:21 It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.

Hos 4:10-11 ...they have forsaken the Lord to cherish whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding.

Ezek 44:21 No priest shall drink wine when he enters the inner court.

Prov 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

Prov 21:17 Whoever loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich.

Prov 23:30-35 Those who tarry long over wine; those who go to try mixed wine. Do not look at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup and goes down smoothly. In the end it bites like a serpent and stings like an adder. Your eyes will see strange things, and your heart utter perverse things. You will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, like one who lies on the top of a mast. "They struck me," you will say, "but I was not hurt; they beat me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake? I must have another drink."

Prov 31:4-6 It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to take strong drink, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted. Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; (both)

The Bible also commends wine as a blessing and aid to celebration.

Gen. 27:28 May God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and **wine**.

Deut. 7:13 He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your **wine** and your oil, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock, in the land that he swore to your fathers to give you.

Deut. 11:14 he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your **wine** and your oil.

Deut. 14:26 ...spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or **strong drink**, whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the LORD your God and rejoice, you and your household.

1Chr. 12:40 And also their relatives, from as far as Issachar and Zebulun and Naphtali, came bringing food on donkeys and on camels and on mules and on oxen, abundant provisions of flour, cakes of figs, clusters of raisins, and **wine** and oil, oxen and sheep, for there was joy in Israel.

Neh. 8:10 Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet **wine** and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Psa. 4:7 You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and **wine** abound

Psa. 104:13-15 From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and **wine** to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man’s heart.

Prov. 3:9-10 Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with **wine**.

Prov. 31:6 Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and **wine** to those in bitter distress;

Eccl. 9:7 Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your **wine** with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.

Song 4:10 How beautiful is your love, my sister, my bride! How much better is your love than **wine**, and the fragrance of your oils than any spice! (7 references to wine in SS)

Is. 25:6 (Worship celebration) On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged **wine**, of rich food full of marrow, of aged **wine** well refined.

Joel 2:19 The LORD answered and said to his people “Behold, I am sending to you grain, **wine**, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations.

Lk 7:33-34 For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

Jesus made wine for the wedding in Cana (Jn 2) to bless a marriage celebration

Of the **236** occurrences of “wine” and **23** occurrences of “strong drink” many are negative, many are positive, and the majority are neutral suggesting that wine was assumed as part of normal life—

It is quite impossible to make a clear case for saying that drinking wine is always sin!

Some argue that “wine” in Bible times was non-fermented grape juice. This is impossible to affirm grammatically, contextually, or historically. A distinction is made between wine and strong drink, but both are discussed positively and negatively. Bottom Line: The Bible makes no attempt to distinguish between alcoholic and non-alcoholic wines but between sobriety and drunkenness. In other words it is a matter of use not of the substance itself.

This is where, I think, our church covenant is wrong to single out a single substance that is not forbidden in Scripture and insist that church members abstain from it.

Wine was permitted and viewed as a blessing from God—It was part of the offering brought to God by his worshippers—yet fraught with dangers.

Yet why would Christians champion alcohol consumption, celebrating it as their new freedom in Christ?

At this point in my life I am a persuaded Teetotalist for these reasons:

[1] My upbringing shaped a bias against alcohol to the point that my conscience tells me not to.

[2] My church covenant requires me to abstain, whether the Bible does or not.

[3] I have brothers in Christ who have struggled with this addiction and I don’t want to be a stumbling block to them.

[4] Alcohol is a mind-altering drug and I choose not to let my reactions be depressed, my moral restraints be blurred, or my critical judgments affected. In light of Paul’s passive imperative in Rms 12:2 to be renewed in the spirit of your mind so that you may demonstrate what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God...

[5] Expensive and nasty ☺ (less serious than the others, but none-the-less a personal reason.

However, does the fact that something has the potential to have harmful effects on individuals, families, and society, mean that it should be forbidden by the church in all of its forms and uses?

Consider the following:

1. The line in question is the only absolute statement in our covenant.

The words, *Moreover, we engage... to abstain from the sale and use of alcoholic drinks as a beverage*, create a rule on an issue the Bible leaves to conscience. The rest of the document calls us to general biblical principles of attitude and behavior allowing latitude as to how they are applied in specific situations. This one does not.

PROBLEM: The Bible doesn’t forbid the use of alcohol but our church covenant does.

The Bible warns against the improper use of alcohol and we would do well to avoid it altogether, but to forbid its use is to go beyond Scripture.

To forbid behaviors that the Bible leaves to individual conscience is to deny soul liberty granted by the gospel. The Philadelphia Baptist Confession of Faith, adopted by the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1742 and printed by Benjamin Franklin in 1743 states,

God alone is ^(a) Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men ^(b) which are in any thing contrary to His Word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, ^(c) is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an ^(d) implicit faith, and absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also.¹

- a. James 4:12; Rom 14:4.
- b. Acts 4:19 [29]; 5:29; 1Cor 7:23; Matt 15:9.
- c. Col 2:20,22,23.
- d. 1Cor 3:5; 2Cor 1:24.

2. The line in question is both recent and provincial.

In the history of Christianity alcoholic prohibition is relatively recent. The use of alcohol was fairly normal even in the colonial era and among the Puritans. During the 1700s and 1800s Baptists, including ministers, own and operated stills and tithed their produce. In 1896, influenced by the Temperance Movement, the Southern Baptist Convention officially denounced alcohol and urged churches to excommunicate members to used or sold it. Other Baptist groups followed suit and then scrambled to find biblical texts to support their convictions.

3. The line in question is inconsistent with our historic Baptist Distinctives.

As a Baptist congregation, we affirm the historic Baptist distinctives. I find it a bit incongruous to say, “We agree that the Bible is the only and infallible rule for faith and practice for the believer” and then go on to insist that our members *abstain from the sale and use of intoxicating drinks as a beverage*.

4. The line in question divides rather than unites.

The church covenant is to be an instrument that unites rather than divides the congregation. We could put every other line of the covenant to a church vote and expect 100% agreement. This would not be the case with the line in question. Truth is not determined by consensus but by revelation. It is expected that Christians will affirm what the Bible clearly states. It is not certain that Christians will unanimously affirm what certain Christians in particular places and times deem to be true.

5. The line in question is a result of social concerns not exegetical conclusions.

The historic Baptist position on alcohol remains unchanged in Europe but was greatly influenced by the Temperance Movement and Prohibition fever here in America. In the years leading up to the passage of the Volstead Act 1/17/1920, many Baptists rewrote their views on Bible interpretation in a rush to scrub all positive references to wine in their Bibles. One leading voice, Dr. Charles Foster Kent of Yale was actually hired to rewrite the Bible, removing all references to wine.² Prohibitionist passions ran so hot that one spokeswoman, Helen Gougar, said, “If I believed that Christ, knowing the nature of intoxicating wine... justified this use by His example, I would repudiate Him as a savior.”³

6. The line in question may be more dangerous than the action it prohibits.

The reason Jesus denounced the Pharisees was not because of their desire to keep Judaism pure but because by their legalism they hijacked men’s consciences. Protecting people from their own choices ties the conscience to a set of rules rather than to God himself. If we would train men and women to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength we could do away with our man-made rules and let holy affections shape holy lives. Its always easier to make a rule than it is to make a disciple.

7. The line in question would be more appropriate as a household guideline.

There is nothing prohibiting Christian parents from establishing household guidelines. A father is free to say, *As for me and my house, we will not drink alcoholic beverages*. However, to avoid the danger of legalism, he must also direct his children’s affections Godward and assure them that household rules are not necessarily God’s rules. The church, on the other hand, is the household of God, the bride of Christ, and the community every believer needs for instruction, nurture, encouragement, and strength. We must not erect man-make barriers that restrict access to needy brothers and sisters to the body of Christ.

Beloved, let’s think prayerfully over these things and let grace rule both our responses and our actions going forward.

¹This paragraph was originally published in the 1647 Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XX, paragraph 2.

²Edward Behr, *Prohibition: Thirteen Years That Changed America* (New York: Arcade, 1965), 115.

³Jack S. Blocker, *Retreat from Reform: The Prohibitionist Movement in the United States: 1890-1913* (Westport: Greenwood, 1976), 86.