



God and Alcohol

A position paper by Justin Dean



Sacred City

Should Christians drink beer, wine or whiskey? Should Sacred City have alcohol at Sacred City events? What does God say about alcohol?

If you have been around Sacred City for any amount of time I hope that you have discovered that we love the Word of God. As the Westminster Confession says it, “The Word of God is our only rule of faith and obedience.”¹ That means that Scripture itself should govern every area of our lives, even our drinking habits. Scripture tells us what is good, what is bad, what should be received with gladness and what should be avoided. Unfortunately, many people affirm this principle with their lips, but when it comes to something that they don’t agree with personally, they choose to live by some other “rule of faith and obedience.” Many people today, especially in certain Protestant denominations, see the negative effects of alcohol consumption in our society and believe alcohol should be avoided. Some churches even ban their pastors from consuming alcohol. I have a pastor friend in the area who had to sign a “No Drinking alcohol” contract before he could be hired on staff. Is this what the Bible teaches? Does the Bible teach that Christians should avoid drinking alcohol? If it does, then I would add my “Amen” to the mix. Let us avoid everything the Word of God tells us to avoid! But if it doesn’t, then such “rules of faith” are an abomination to God and an attempt to add to his infallible and all sufficient word. Jesus spoke harshly to the Pharisees who added their manmade rules to the Word of God and made it harder for people to enter into the Kingdom of God (Matthew 23). Paul told a group of Christians in Galatia, who were preaching a false gospel which said a person needed to believe in Jesus **and** be circumcised in order to be a part of the family of God, to take it one step further and emasculate themselves (Galatians 5:12). That’s strong language.

In our city, I have come across many people with a faith that looked like this bad equation: **Jesus + “abstinence from alcohol” = serious Christianity**. I have heard pastors declare from the stage, “any wise Christian would never use alcohol.” Much of the time though, such “rules” are not necessarily that straightforward or black and white. Often they are even buried in lines such as “I have no problem with alcohol, but...” and then the person offers up ten reasons why people shouldn't drink alcohol, the pastor shouldn't talk about drinking alcohol, and any serious Christian wouldn't drink whiskey. This attitude makes people who drink alcohol look like they are less Christian or less serious about their faith than those who abstain from alcohol. This is what we need to address. Is such a position congruent with the Word of God? Does God’s Word tell Christians that it is better for them not to drink alcohol?

¹ Westminster Larger Catechism, *Question and Answer 3*

To answer this question as thoroughly as I can in this medium I would like to do three things. First, examine God's Word concerning alcohol. Second, take a brief look at history and see how the church has dealt with this issue over the past two millennia. And third, draft out a short official position of the elders regarding alcohol and its use here at Sacred City.

Let's take a look at the Scriptures.

The Bible talks about "wine" and "strong drink" over 260 times in the Scriptures. The first mention of wine is in Genesis Chapter 9. Noah gets off the ark, thanks God for His salvation by offering a sacrifice, and then plants a vineyard, makes wine, and gets knock-down drunk. Alcohol does not make a positive entrance into the Scriptures, Noah gets drunk and naked and sins against the Lord. The Bible condemns this behavior over and over. Proverbs 20:1 says, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise." From these two Scriptures, we see right away that alcohol has the potential to lead us astray. Add to this many Scriptures condemning drunkenness (1 Samuel 1:14; Isaiah 5:11, 22, 28:1, 28:7, 29:9, 56:12; Jeremiah 23:9, 51:7; Joel 3:3; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Timothy 3:3, 8; Titus 1:7; 2:3) and one quickly gets the picture that alcohol is something that should be avoided at all costs. I mean, what's the point if it just leads to drunkenness?

Well, that's not all the Bible has to say about alcohol. Five chapters after the Noah incident, in Genesis 14:18 we find Melchizedek, a prefiguring type of Jesus, offering up wine to Abram. Jesus gives Abram wine? Why would he do that? Then in Deuteronomy 14:26, God tells His people that it is good to drink wine and strong drink to the Lord: "and spend your 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." In Isaiah, the Lord prepares a banquet with "well aged wines... and fine, well aged wines" for his people (Isaiah 25:6). Then the nail in the proverbial coffin comes in Psalm 104:14 where the psalmist says that God has given us "wine to gladden the heart of man."

Daniel B. Wallace, New Testament Scholar and Professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, states,

by the time of the first century, every adult was obliged to have four glasses of wine during the Passover celebration. Jesus and his disciples did this in the Last Supper. The fact that the wine of the Passover was a symbol the Lord used for his blood and for the new covenant implicitly shows that our Lord's view of wine was quite different from that of many modern Christians.²

² Wallace, D. (2004). *The Bible and Alcohol*. Retrieved March 25, 2015, from <https://bible.org/article/bible-and-alcohol>

So, this issue isn't as one-sided as we first thought. It seems like the Scriptures say, "alcohol is good. It was given by God to gladden our hearts, loosen our lips, and increase joy and fellowship with our fellow human beings." But this gift, like any and all gifts, can be abused. Work in excess leads one to break the Sabbath. Sleep in excess leads one to laziness and folly. Food in excess is gluttony. The love of money in excess is greed. When a person drinks alcohol *in excess* it leads to drunkenness, mockery, brawling, and a host of other sins and foolishness.

This seems to be the position of Jesus who not only drank at least three cups of wine on the night of his Passover but who also turned water into wine at the wedding festival of Cana in Galilee (John 2). This was a miracle that made between 120 and 180 gallons of "the best wine," which had the potential to get everyone there thoroughly drunk! Jesus did not abstain from alcohol nor did he ask his followers to abstain from alcohol consumption. In Matthew 11:19 Jesus says, "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" and in Mark 2:13-17 Jesus takes brand new disciples in with him to Levi's house to eat and drink with sinners. Jesus did not believe that his followers should abstain from alcohol to be good witnesses. Jesus did not believe that drinking alcohol made someone less serious about their faith or gave evidence to them caving in to the pressures of the culture. Jesus drank alcohol to the glory of God. For Jesus, drinking was an act of worship (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Yeah, but what about the weaker brother principle? What if my drinking alcohol causes my brother to stumble? What if my drinking alcohol offends my brother? What did Paul mean when he wrote that "If food makes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make by brother stumble," (1 Corinthians 8:13).

Jim West's article for Modern Reformation Magazine is helpful in assessing this question. West writes:

To answer this question we must assess a common, superficial interpretation of the word "offend." Many will use the word "offend" in a way altogether foreign to the Apostle Paul. There are some who take offense at virtually anything that contradicts their own traditions. To allow such Christians to regulate our lives would be folly. Practical Theology Professor R. B. Kuiper writes:

"Emphatically though he taught that Christians must serve one another in love, he did not promise never to do anything that might possibly *displease* a brother.... What Paul meant was that he would scrupulously refrain from knowingly placing, by his conduct, a stumbling block before his brother over which the brother might fall into sin."

Biblically, "to offend," means to make a person sin. If we place someone in a context where he feels pressured to eat or to drink what he cannot do in faith, then we have "offended" him (Rom. 14:20, 23). But to 'offend' does not mean to displease or irritate a brother. If this were the meaning, then the Christian who drinks wine or strong drink would have greater justification to be offended, since wine is a gift that should elicit our

praise (Ps. 104). “To offend,” means to “stumble” or trip a brother into sin. Because of this narrow meaning, and with specific regard to Christian liberty, it might even be permissible to drink wine in the presence of a weak brother, as long as we do not grandstand it, or use the occasion to pressure a weak brother to sin against his conscience. A “weak brother” is not weak because he is easily irritable; a weak brother has a weak conscience.³

Let me use an example: every week in my Missional Community someone brings beer. One week, a member was bringing a friend who was 9 months sober and in Alcoholics Anonymous. Thinking through this principle, and making a general assumption, the member asked everyone in the MC to abstain from bringing alcohol that week. It wasn't a big deal, but was that necessary? I asked the member if he had talked to his friend and asked him if having alcohol present would cause him to stumble. He had not, but then proceeded to have the conversation with him. The friend said that he was no longer tempted at all to drink and we should feel free to enjoy our beer at our Missional Community. If this friend would have said, “Yes, it is a current struggle and I would be tempted to sin,” we would have gladly abstained from alcohol that night.

So this leads us to the question: If the Word of God does not condemn the use of alcohol by Christians why do so many people in our culture think that Christians should abstain from alcohol?

To answer this question we need to study a bit of history. It might come as a surprise to you that the people of God, represented by the nation of Israel and Christians, have always enjoyed alcohol, at least up until the last 200 years, when some Protestant Christians joined the Prohibitionists in their efforts to heavily curtail alcohol consumption. Wine was served in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper each week and alcohol was seen as a good gift of God, but one which should never be used in excess.

In Medieval times, monks and monasteries were the producers of the best beer and wines⁴ and the monks were allotted about five liters of alcohol a day. During fasts, beer was allowed but wine was not because beer had only bread and water as its ingredients. Some of today's breweries trace their ancestries back to these monasteries.⁵

It is largely known that the reformers Martin Luther, John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Knox all strongly supported the enjoyment of wine as a blessing from God. Martin Luther's wife brewed her own beer and when Martin was away on ministry he wrote to her often bewailing the absence of her home brew. Martin wrote her with his usual

³ West, J. (2000, April 1). A Sober Assessment of Reformational Drinking. *Modern Reformation*, 38-42.

⁴ West, J. (2003). *Drinking with Calvin & Luther: A history of alcohol in the church*. Lincoln, CA: Oakdown. p. 22

⁵ Gately, I. (2008). *Drink: A cultural history of alcohol*. New York: Gotham Books. p. 79

humor and wit, “You must wonder how long I am likely to stay or, rather, how long you will be rid of me. I keep thinking what good wine and beer I have at home, as well as a beautiful wife, or shall I say lord?”

Jim West notes:

John Calvin wrote in *The Institutes of Christian Religion* that “It is permissible to use wine not only for necessity, but also to make us merry.” Calvin wrote regarding the miracle of Christ turning the water into wine at Cana of Galilee as “most excellent wine.” He laid down two conditions for wine drinking: First, it must be moderate, “lest men forget themselves, drown their senses, and destroy their strength.” Calvin even argued that “in making merry,” those who enjoy wine “feel a livelier gratitude to God.”

Interestingly, Calvin's yearly salary in Geneva included several barrels of wine. The Town Council recognized the large number of guests he would be expected to entertain; thus he was given “the substantial annual salary of 500 florins, together with twelve measures of wheat and two bossets (perhaps 250 gallons) of wine.”

Calvin was also persuaded that wine should be served during the administration of the Lord's Supper. He catechized his catechumens accordingly, “But why is the body of our Lord figured by bread, and his blood by wine?” He answered that “by wine the hearts of men are gladdened, their strength recruited, and the whole man strengthened, so by the blood of our Lord the same benefits are received by our souls.”⁶

A Very Brief History of Alcohol in America

The early English colonists to the New World brought with them a great love for alcohol. The early settlements of Jamestown and Plymouth Colony lamented the lack of an adequate supply until 1628, when the ship *Arbella*, brought 10,000 gallons of wine along with the Puritan colonists led by John Winthrop. The colonies eventually brewed their own beer from local ingredients and by the late 1620s and by 1634, every community in the colonies was required by law to build a public drinking place “for the receiving, refreshment, and entertainment of travelers and strangers, and to serve public occasions.”⁷ Increase Mather, a prominent colonial clergyman and president of Harvard, expressed the common view in a sermon against drunkenness: “Drink is in itself a good creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness, but the abuse of drink is from Satan; the wine is from God, but the drunkard is from the Devil.”⁸

This attitude is found among even among the early Methodists Charles Wesley and

⁶ West, J. (2000, April 1). A Sober Assessment of Reformational Drinking. *Modern Reformation*, 38-42.

⁷ Gately, I. (2008). *Drink: A cultural history of alcohol*. New York: Gotham Books.

⁸ Mather, I. (1673). *Wo to Drunkards. Two sermons testifying against the sin of drunkenness*. Increase Mather, Boston.

George Whitfield, and Baptists John Gill and John Bunyan. Things began to change rather drastically when Methodist founder John Wesley began to warn, "You see the wine when it sparkles in the cup, and are going to drink of it. I tell you there is poison in it! And, therefore, beg you to throw it away."⁹ John Wesley hated all hard liquor and even said that many distillers who sold their produce indiscriminately to anyone "were nothing more than poisoners and murderers accursed by God."¹⁰ In 1780 at the Methodist Conference in Baltimore, the leaders opposed distilled liquors and determined to "disown those who would not renounce the practice" of producing it.¹¹

The early Americans were not known for their temperance, partly because of the lack of access to good water. In addition to this and contrary to Europeans, Americans separated their eating and drinking. Drinking itself became the focus, removed from the tempering qualities of food, family, and the social propriety that accompanied mixed-sex environments. Men consumed most of the alcohol in saloons and taverns, which were often off-limits to women. The further the distance from populated cities with established churches, the worse the drunkenness. Since men consumed most of the beer, whiskey, rum, and bourbon, this inordinate rate of booze consumption threatened jobs, families, and civil society. Temperance societies, often led by women, and Protestant church movements sprung up with initiatives to curb and abolish drinking. These movements worked in counties and churches to increase public disdain for alcohol. Temperance literature eventually flooded school curriculums throughout the nation. Temperance societies hired scholars to change and rewrite the Bible, removing any reference to alcohol. Temperance preachers taught that any reference to wine in the Bible, including the Eucharist or communion wine, was simply referring to common grape juice.

This led alcohol itself to be seen as evil in the eyes of many Christians. Many churches even wanted to get rid of the use of wine in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This was impossible, because grape juice begins naturally fermenting upon pressing; until 1869 when Thomas Bramwell Welch, an ordained Wesleyan Methodist minister, discovered a way to pasteurize grape juice, and he used his particular preservation method to prepare juice for the Lord's Supper at a Methodist Episcopal church. Yes, that is where we get Welch's grape juice from!

Eventually, these movements established enough political support to cause the passing of the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1919, which forbade the manufacture, sale, and distribution of alcohol. Medical patients and those who took communion in churches were exempt. Industrial distillation and home brewing were f

⁸ Wesley, J. (1999, January 1) Wesley Center for Applied Theology. Sermon 140 - On Public Diversions. Retrieved March 26, 2015.

¹⁰ Wesley, J. (1999, January 1) Wesley Center for Applied Theology. Sermon 50 – The Use of Money. Retrieved March 26, 2015.

¹¹ Bangs, N. (1838). *A History of the Methodist Episcopal Church*. New York: Pub. by T. Mason and G. Lane, for the Methodist Episcopal Church. p. 134

also exempt. The laws and the continued supply of alcohol led to the formation of nightclubs, speakeasies, and increased organized crime. The police commissioner of New York City in 1929 stated that the city was home to around 32,000 drinking places, which was twice the number of saloons and other pre-prohibition drinking venues. Even two presidents, Harding and Coolidge, drank freely during the Prohibition era. Vineyards began legally selling to households home-winemaking kits consisting of concentrated grape juice and the tools and ingredients needed to ferment and produce wine. As a result, Prohibition era per-person wine consumption grew higher than before Prohibition was enacted. Crime, alcohol poisoning, corrupt and incompetent government agents, a need for the tax revenue provided through alcohol sales, and a recognition that America still consumed a great deal of alcohol led to the repealing of the 18th Amendment in 1932.

Public concern regarding alcohol heightened again in the 1970s with the discovery of fetal alcohol syndrome and the increasing deaths of young people suffered along borders of states with different minimum drinking ages. In 1984, the Federal Government created a national law requiring states to establish the minimum age of alcohol possession and purchase to 21. In contrast to the tempering consequences of alcohol abuse, advocates for alcohol began touting the medical benefits of drinking, which were increasingly being understood in light of new research. To this day, American culture enjoys a love-hate relationship with alcohol. The consequences of its abuses are obvious to all, especially to the victims and their families. The benefits are enjoyed by many as well, especially for those whose lives and relationships are enhanced by social drinking and for those who benefit from the medicinal side-effects in the risk reduction to coronary artery disease.

A Way Forward

There are basically three positions when it comes to alcohol and its use for a Christian.

- 1. Prohibition.** Those who believe that drinking alcohol is a sin are prohibitionists. At no time is it allowed for those who claim to be Christians.
- 2. Abstinence.** Those who believe that drinking alcohol is not a sin, but that prudence and godliness require abstaining from drinking alcohol. There is such strong concern for its abuse that it is advised against at all times. Churches that follow this position often require their leadership to avoid drinking alcohol.
- 3. Moderation.** Moderates believe that alcohol is a gift from God and should be enjoyed as such in moderation, realizing that drunkenness is sinful and that alcohol's abuse can lead to very harmful consequences for all involved.

But, does abuse warrant prohibition or abstinence, a posture not taken in 1800 years of church history in cultures and times that also dealt with drunkenness? Additionally, do

prohibition and abstinence display a pharisaical attitude that Jesus and the Apostles strongly opposed?

To use a great Reductio ad absurdum argument from Martin Luther himself,

Do you suppose that abuses are eliminated by destroying the object which is abused? Men can go wrong with wine and women. Shall we then prohibit and abolish women? The sun, the moon, and the stars have been worshipped. Shall we then pluck them out of the sky? ... See how much He (God) has been able to accomplish through me, though I did no more than pray and preach. The Word did it all. Had I wished I might have started a conflagration (a great fire) at Worms (the place he was tried before the Roman Catholic church). But while I sat still and drank beer with Philip and Amsdorf, God dealt the papacy a mighty blow.

Sacred City Church believes the way to move forward in relation to the Christian's use of alcohol is in moderation. We will continue to use wine in our gatherings during the Lord's Supper; we will allow alcohol at Sacred City functions such as Missional Community gatherings and church-wide picnics. But we will stay sober and not use this gift in excess thereby bringing dishonor to the name of Christ. We will also not look down on those who either abstain from or choose to enjoy alcohol. Sacred City pastor Casey Shutt explains this well:

Just like it might be tempting for Christians abstaining from alcohol to look down upon their Christian brothers and sisters who drink, it could also be tempting for Christians who enjoy alcohol to look down upon their Christian brothers and sisters who abstain from alcohol. Both attitudes are sinful. To exalt the drinking of alcohol as a sign of Christian maturity and to assume that those who don't drink (for good reasons) are somehow less enlightened is just as pharisaical/legalistic as the inverse.

Common Question and Answers

I have heard it said that when the Bible talks about wine, it's actually speaking of grape juice. Is that true?

No, it is absolutely not true. Grape juice is never called wine in the Bible. The closest thing we see to the mention of grape juice in the Scriptures is in Genesis 40:11, which reads, "Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." If this was done immediately, it would be grape juice - but the fermentation process starts right away. This was not called wine in the text.

Also, Professor Daniel B. Wallace reminds us about all of the condemnations regarding the negative side effects of wine. He states,

The significance of these negative statements is just this: If this were only grape juice, why would excess in drinking it be condemned? If this were only grape juice, why are certain mental effects attributed to it (cf., e.g., Psalm 60:3)? One can't have it both ways. You can't say that wine is always grape juice, for then the negative statements in Scripture make no sense; those who say that it is only grape juice tend to focus just on the neutral and positive passages, conveniently allowing them to condemn the drinking of real wine at all times. But even this position is not logical: If the Bible only speaks of grape juice, then it makes no comment about alcoholic wine. And if so, then it does not directly prohibit it. And if we are going to prohibit something that the Bible does not address, why stop at wine? Why don't we include the ballet, opera, football games, country-western music (actually, I might be in favor of banning this one!), salt water fishing, zippers on clothes, etc. Once legalism infests the soul it doesn't know where to quit. In sum, is wine the same as grape juice? No, for if it were, the Bible would hardly condemn the abuse of such. Those who argue that the two are identical simply cannot handle the passages that speak about excess.¹¹

And again, Wallace makes his point while commenting on Jesus turning the water into wine at Cana of Galilee:

But it most certainly was not grape juice: the head waiter in John 2:10 said, "Every man sets out the good wine first, then after the guests have drunk freely, the poor wine. But you have kept the good wine until now." The verb translated "drunk freely" is almost always used of getting drunk (and is so translated in the NRSV here). In the least, the people at this wedding feast, if not drunk, would certainly be drinking alcohol fairly freely (if not, this verb means something here that is nowhere else attested). And this makes perfect sense in the context: The reason why a man brings out the poorer wine later is because the good wine has numbed the senses a bit. Grape juice would hardly mask anything. Note also Acts 2:13 - "They are full of sweet wine" - an inaccurate comment made about the apostles when they began speaking in tongues, as though this explained their unusual behavior. The point is: If they were full of grape juice would this comment even have made any sense at all? That would be like saying, "Well, they're all acting strange and silly because they have had too much orange juice this morning!"¹²

Is there a time when people should abstain from alcohol?

Yes, absolutely. John the Baptist was told by God not to drink alcohol, "And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15). John was told not to drink, but Jesus came eating and drinking. There is not a one size fits all solution. People who lack self-control should abstain from drinking until they grow in temperance.

¹¹ Wallace, D. (2004). *The Bible and Alcohol*. Retrieved March 25, 2015, from <https://bible.org/article/bible-and-alcohol>

¹² Ibid.

How much is too much? Where's the line on being sober and drunk?

This is an area where we need to use wisdom. Men much wiser than me have given me great advice on this matter. One says, "Calculate the alcohol content (5%, for example) multiply the number of ounces (20) and then limit your intake to a number of 100 in a two hour period." See kids, math is important in the real world! Another friend says, "No more than two drinks the first hour, no more than one drink per hour for every hour after that. Don't drink anything for 30-60 minutes before going home, except water." I limit myself to two drinks when I am out and away from home.